TO RULE IN A TURBULENT WORLD VOL.2

乱世为王

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[VOLUME 2]

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ARC 2: THE BUTTERFLY'S LOVE FOR THE FLOWER

[Chapter 16]

The east market was considerably rowdier than the west, as it was teeming with stalls selling fish and other fresh seafood. The ground was damp and there was mud everywhere.

As he and Qiao Jue arrived, You Miao asked, "Why did you bring me here?"

"Didn't you say you wanted to recruit tenants and hire permanent labor?" Qiao Jue replied.

Standing beside an enclosure fence, You Miao blinked at first, but understanding soon dawned on him. The east market was where servants were purchased. Unable to afford to raise their children, all the impoverished families of the entire Yang and Jiao prefectures dragged their sons and daughters here with the intent of selling away their freedom to an affluent family. Many tenant farmers also brought their whole families here to Yang Prefecture in search of employment, as they could no longer make ends meet. There were both temp and perm farmhands here as well—their skin tough and tanned, squatting by the corners of the workhouse[1] and eating noodles from chipped bowls.

You Miao and Qiao Jue were brilliantly dressed, so the moment they entered the "people market," a group immediately rushed over to crowd around them.

"Laoye, you hirin'?"

"Laoye, you need farmhands?"

“Laoye, please grant me a job!”

Qiao Jue shielded You Miao, worried that they’d push him, and berated the crowd, “Move aside!”

You Miao was instantly overjoyed at the sight of so many available people. He tugged Qiao Jue’s sleeve and said, “Xiao-jiu, I’ll take all of them…”

“Don’t talk nonsense,” Qiao Jue whispered back. “Tell me which one you like and I’ll take care of it for you.”

“But my estate seriously lacks labor. I’ve got the land, but no one to work it…”

“You can’t hire just anybody even if you can afford it,” Qiao Jue reasoned. “There are perm workers who are lazy slackers. It’s better to go without anyone than to have a bad apple. Leave this to xiao-jiu.”

Thus, You Miao followed Qiao Jue’s lead, who turned his head and added as they walked, “Although Li Zhifeng attends to you with care, it’s still not good to not have a few servants around to command. I had wanted to send you some of my people, but unfortunately, *that woman* already bought the loyalty of everyone at the estate. I’ve only got one guy who obeys me…”

“That’s also why I didn’t bring anyone from Sunshower Estate…” You Miao replied.

“Let me buy you a few clever ones,” Qiao Jue said. “You can place them inside or outside the house. Do you want maids or boy servants?”

The two entered the people market and stopped to look. Rows and rows of people were lined up inside, each of them unkempt and disheveled and watching You Miao and Qiao Jue with keen eyes. At last, You Miao was thoroughly shaken—this was the sale of humans. It wasn’t something he’d encountered before, but now, he was really and truly seeing it firsthand. Men, women, the old and the young—they all came with a price tag. Tall ones, short ones, young ones, strong ones; as long as he had the money, they could be purchased.

This was different from traffickers, who would be apprehended by the government for their business. Here, everyone was willingly selling themselves if only for a bite to eat. You Miao couldn’t describe how he felt for the longest time.

Qiao Jue nudged You Miao with his elbow. “Hey, yoohoo. I asked if you want boys or girls?”

“I…I don’t know,” You Miao admitted.

The more You Miao looked around, the more he felt his heart clench. He had it good, he really did. If he had been born into one of these families, he’d probably also end up waiting to be sold by his mom and dad.

“Let’s get boys,” You Miao said at last.

“Pick my family,” a man in his thirties quickly piped up. “My wife is gone, I’ve just these two boys. Take all three of us; I’ll take care of your garden, I can farm, and my boys will both be yours to command.”

You Miao was going to cave, but Qiao Jue spoke up. “And just how old is your youngest son? What can he do?”

“They’re both obedient,” said the man with a chuckle. “The youngest is eleven this year.”

“What about your oldest son?” You Miao asked.

“He’s sixteen,” the man replied.

Qiao Jue told the younger child to open his mouth to check if his teeth were good. The older boy was holding the hand of the younger one. Their skin was tanned dark, and they watched You Miao guardedly.

“Call him ‘laoye’ now,” the man whispered at them.

But the two children didn’t make a peep.

“We’ll take them,” You Miao said.

“What’s your surname? You’ve got your census registration papers? Do you carry debt?” Qiao Jue questioned the man, who smiled apologetically in response.

“To answer laoye, my surname is Song, and I’m a citizen of Jiao Prefecture. I am indeed carrying debt. I owe my former landlord seven strings of coins…” he said as he took out the loan note to show them.

“Not worth it,” Qiao Jue said to You Miao. “Let’s go check over there.”

Qiao Jue pulled You Miao away, but You Miao turned his head back to the man and asked, “Why did you come to Yang Prefecture?”

“Go,” Qiao Jue urged in a low voice by You Miao’s ear. “You’re here to hire people, not to be a saint.”

The man named Song chased after You Miao to reply. “Shaoye! Shaoye! My wife died of illness. My dad passed on a meager acre of land to

me, but I couldn't pay the rent, so the landlord took the land back. I borrowed that money because I couldn't afford a doctor…or to bury the mother of my sons… Shaoye, please pity me and grant me a job…"

Qiao Jue only smiled at the man's pleas. "Don't take them at their word; those are only half-truths. You can listen, but don't take them seriously."

You Miao nodded and stopped talking altogether. As the pair walked halfway through the market, every family they encountered was either selling themselves or looking for employment. Only now did You Miao learn that there were actually so many people without land who were unable to feed their entire families. Qiao Jue further explained to You Miao that these people had all lost land, which was why they had come out to find work to survive.

These days, owning a bit of land was not a guarantee for a bite to eat. What was grown and harvested had to be sold, but the cost of staple grain was completely controlled by the merchants. With only a few acres of land, the whole family got fed if the weather was favorable for the year. However, if there was a drought or a flood and the prospect of a harvest was poor, taking into account the various taxes on top of that, there'd be no choice but to pawn off land and borrow money from the landlord. Interest would consequently build up, and with no money to repay the loan, the land would get taken away. One would go on to become a permanent labor hand. The income from that wouldn't be enough to pay the interest on the debt, however, and it would balloon, making it even harder to pay government taxes. At that point, the only option left was to uproot and leave home in search of a different place to make a living.

If they stayed in their county of origin and were unable to repay their debt, they would have no choice but to use their children as collateral.

You Miao's heart throbbed all the more as he listened, and the bit of joy he had at the beginning had completely dispersed like clouds. After making a round of the people market, they noticed a handsome man standing at the west end. He was tall and strapping, and was eating something. It was Li Zhifeng.

Li Zhifeng's head was down, and he stared at the two kids kneeling in front of him as he chewed on a toasted sesame flatbread.

"Li Zhifeng!" You Miao called to him.

At the sight of You Miao approaching, Li Zhifeng took out a tanghulu to give to him. You Miao, in turn, rummaged out the crispy fried fish he'd bought for him. Li Zhifeng took the fish and dug right in.

Qiao Jue was still checking people out as he stood on the side, so You Miao asked Li Zhifeng, "Is the boat hired?"

Li Zhifeng nodded. "Yes. It can go first thing tomorrow morning."

You Miao ate his tanghulu while Li Zhifeng ate his deep-fried fish, and the pair stared at the two kids kneeling in front of them. The children were twins, and they held a wooden sign that read, *"We are selling ourselves to bury our father."* Behind them was a dead body covered with a simple cloth. There were flies buzzing around it.

"Why are you here?" You Miao asked.

"I heard there are people seeking employment here," Li Zhifeng replied. "So I thought to come and buy you a few boy servants to order around in the courtyard."

"You're tired of waiting on me?" You Miao winked at him.

Li Zhifeng was wholly focused on eating his fish and missed the playful gesture. "When you order me to go out and work, I can't watch over you and have to leave you by yourself. Get two little servants, let *them* run the errands, and then I can stay with you."

You Miao nodded and reached for Li Zhifeng's hand, lacing their fingers together and swinging their arms. He then asked, "Did you also hold a sign like this for people to buy you in the past?"

Li Zhifeng quirked a mirthless smile. "Heh."

You Miao couldn't resist wanting to tease him, but Li Zhifeng said instead, "Give them a tael of silver and let them bury their dad."

You Miao turned his eyes to the two boys. Although they were scrawny, they were spirited, so he reached for his money.

Li Zhifeng questioned them, "How old are you two?"

"Fifteen," answered one of the boys.

"What're your names?"

"I'm Mu Yan, and he's Mu Feng." The other boy glanced at his own brother, then looked up to Li Zhifeng.

You Miao asked, "Which one of you is the older brother, and which one is the younger?"

The one who spoke first pointed at himself. "I'm the older."

“Go bury your dad.” You Miao gave them a tael of silver, and the older of the twins immediately got up and left.

Li Zhifeng instructed the younger one, “This person here is now your young master. Once your personal affairs are taken care of, go wait for us at the Yang Prefecture riverside pier early tomorrow morning.”

Respectfully, Mu Feng gave You Miao three sound kowtows. After You Miao helped him up, he and Li Zhifeng headed to the east end of the marketplace.

“Let me carry you,” Li Zhifeng said. “The ground is dirty.”

“Don’t.” You Miao was feeling a little embarrassed now; it really wasn’t right to be called “laoye” by all these people and have his servant carry him on his back. When Qiao Jue saw Li Zhifeng again, he waved him over.

“How about this kid?” he asked.

The boy in question was standing there quietly. Lanky in build with long limbs, he was only a bit shorter than Li Zhifeng and was wearing a pair of worn straw shoes. His eyes were bright, not dazed and blank like the other folks here.

“I’m not selling myself,” the boy stated. “My brother committed a crime, so he was drafted into the army. I’m only hunting for a job so I can use the money to grease connections.”

“What’s your name?” You Miao asked.

“Why do you keep asking people for their names?” Qiao Jue teased. “Are you not going to name the boys you bring home?”

“My name’s Cheng Guangwu,” the boy answered.

You Miao eyed him, giving him a once-over, while Li Zhifeng pinched his wrist and raised his tanned arm thus. Cheng Guangwu was skin and bones, but his fingers were long and slender.

“Good bone structure for martial arts training,” Li Zhifeng commented absently.

Cheng Guangwu was going to throw off Li Zhifeng’s hand, but Li Zhifeng only exerted a bit of strength and his fingers pinched him like pincers. It made the boy scrunch up his face and give a stifled grunt; the pain forcing him to bow.

“Don’t bully him,” You Miao laughingly chided. With a hint of a smile, Li Zhifeng let go.

Cheng Guangwu said, holding his wrist, “Give me half a string of coins per month and I’ll go with you.”

Qiao Jue glanced at You Miao and turned to Cheng Guangwu. “Done. Wait for us at the Yang Prefecture pier first thing tomorrow morning.”

When the men around them heard this, they all came crowding again, and Qiao Jue quickly shouted, “Don’t push! Don’t anyone dare squash my young master!”

Li Zhifeng shielded You Miao as a bunch of people surrounded them once more. Qiao Jue waved his sleeves and spoke to them in a light, nonchalant tone.

“There’s too many of you; I can’t sort you all out in such a short time. How about this—go to Riverwave Estate tomorrow to check things out in person. Head northward on the official road for five miles after you get out of Yang Prefectural City, then take the road on the left at the fork, cross the river, and head northwest. Once you see Anlu Village, just ask around. It’s a hundred and twenty miles of travel; figure it out yourselves.”

“Laoye, will there be land for us to farm once we’re there?” someone asked.

“Not for certain,” Qiao Jue replied. “We’ll see if you’re sick or if you’re lazy. We can talk after you get there.”

The group of permanent laborers dispersed after that, each preoccupied with their own thoughts on the matter.

“Are you not going to pick a few maids?” Qiao Jue asked You Miao, who only smiled in response.

“This is fine for now. I can’t afford too many servants, anyway.”

“Shaoye.” The man named Song from earlier jostled his way over to the group, nodding and bowing.

“I *am* missing a gardener, though. Tell him to come with me,” You Miao said actively.

Qiao Jiao could tell You Miao liked this family of three, and nodded in response. He took out a bit of broken silver, gauged the weight of it, then placed it in the man’s hands.

“Go repay your debt. Don’t run away with the money, eh.”

Song replied with a laugh, “Where in the world can I run to? Thank you shaoye, thank you.”

* * *

Qiao Jue took You Miao and Li Zhifeng home that day. The manor of Shaoyuan Tea Estate was located on Fengweizhu Lane, and not much of it had changed in the past three years. You Miao could hear Madam Bai harshly scolding the servants from outside on the streets.

"Can't even hold a cup of water properly when we've raised you so big! Were you not fed?!"

Qiao Jue's face immediately twisted with irritation when he heard his sister-in-law yelling inside, but You Miao waved dismissively with a smile. When the three entered the Qiao Family's large courtyard, they saw Madam Bai sitting there washing her feet with her hair down and loose.

"Saozi, where's er-ge?" Qiao Jue asked.

"Went out to drink," Madam Bai answered gruffly with a grim face. "Who did you bring home this time… Well now, it's Miao-zi!" Madam Bai's smile bloomed as though she had swapped her face.

You Miao smiled back and greeted, "Er-jiuma."

"Your brother was talking about you when he came over for New Year's, eh." Smiling, Madam Bai rose to her feet. "Come! Come sit."

You Miao hummed affirmatively, but kept his hands tucked in his sleeves and stayed standing where he was. His mom and this aunt of his had never gotten along. His second uncle Qiao Zhang had never wanted to come home either; he felt vexed as soon as he stepped foot there, what with how tight the leash was on him, so he'd spent his days screwing around outside. Since You Dechuan had been financially supporting the Qiao family for the majority of the time, You Miao knew her attitude toward You Hange must've changed favorably. He didn't feel like cozying up to her because of that, so he didn't bother.

As he entered the house to go wash his face, Qiao Jue asked, "Is er-ge not coming home for dinner?"

Madam Bai replied with a raised voice, "How would *I* know? He goes out every day like he's lost his soul. Who knows if he's watching a play somewhere right now…"

You Miao circled the yard twice and came to the abrupt realization that it had shrunk in size. When he was little, Qiao Ke-er used to bring him home and he and Qiao Jue would chase each other and play around in the yard. It had felt very big and very spacious back then, so how had it become

so small now? He'd hit the edge in only so many steps; how dull. The entire yard was choked with gloom, too.

Qiao Jue was talking inside the house. As You Miao hopped around, step by step, he asked, "Where's cousin?"

"She's already married, so she's at her own home." Madam Bai casually grabbed a bamboo stick and started beating the maid kneeling on the ground. "Who's got the time to come back to their maiden house every other day?"

"Let's eat. The nephew's hungry too," Qiao Jue spoke up.

Tepid, Madam Bai stood up and went to order for dinner to be served. Qiao Jue then turned to You Miao.

"You Miao, eat in my room. Come, xiao-jiu will have a drink with you."

Dinner was served just as the lamps were lit for the evening, but Qiao Zhang never came back. Qiao Jue kept You Miao company and ate for a bit before the estate manager came to verify and balance the books. The doors had to open for business the next day, and that couldn't be done without the account balanced—thus, Qiao Jue had no choice but to put down his chopsticks. He urged You Miao to eat and drink to his pleasure before leaving with the manager.

Li Zhifeng joined You Miao at the table, where there were only two cold cuts and three dishes: a plate of pig ears and shredded rabbit for the cold cuts, and fried duck with ginger, steamed fish, and fried garlic sprouts with cured meat for the dishes. The food was indeed nowhere close to what Shen Garden could offer.

You Miao could never get used to the food served at his uncle's place; the rice was always too dry and too hard. As he chewed the grain, he offhandedly commented, "Not even any steamed egg."

"I'll make some for you when we get back," Li Zhifeng said.

"The rice is so hard, I'm choking," You Miao complained.

Li Zhifeng grinned. He himself had eaten three large bowls of rice, and when he went to dish out more, he found there was none left inside the rice bucket. You Miao had only eaten a half a bowl; he shoved the rest into Li Zhifeng's bowl. As he watched Li Zhifeng eat, Madam Bai's voice came drifting into his ears. She was arguing with Qiao Jue—and in front of the estate manager, too. Qiao Jue must've said something.

“There aren’t any tea saplings. And with your er-ge acting the way he does, who can you go for them—”

“Don’t be like that, er-sao.[2] They’re for Miao-zi…”

“Nephew, nephew, you don’t give a crap about your own family, running off to the others all the time…”

“And is there anything left for me in my own family?”

Madam Bai’s voice was so shrill that it kept drilling through the cracks of the walls. You Miao explained to Li Zhifeng, “That woman is always complaining that my mom took too much for her dowry.”

“Oh.” Li Zhifeng mumbled through his chewing, “Dowry.”

“Who’s the one managing the household? Do my words count for nothing now?!” Qiao Jue’s angry shout finally quieted Madam Bai. There was the sound of doors being slammed after that, before everything fell silent.

A moment later, there was a noise outside the door that sounded like someone passing by. You Miao poked his head out to look and saw a woman had stopped in the corridor.

“Ah, Miao-zi?”

The woman who had spoken was Qiao Zhang’s little concubine—someone You Miao had always called Auntie Sha. You Miao greeted her, but didn’t get up. Auntie Sha eyed Li Zhifeng appraisingly before she gave an obsequious chuckle.

“How did you find the time to come visit today? And who’s this lovely lad?”

Li Zhifeng gave her a glance, and You Miao poked his face with his chopsticks. “You’re not allowed to look at her.”

It was a long time after Auntie Sha left before Qiao Jue returned with a sour face. When he sat down and noticed the rice bucket was empty, he yelled, “Hongming!”

A boy servant came and took the rice bucket to refill it, but returned briefly after to say, “Sir, there’s no more rice.”

Qiao Jue was rendered so speechless that he couldn’t utter a single word. Li Zhifeng still had just under half a bowl of rice left and was about to share, but Qiao Jue snapped furiously, “Eat your food!”

You Miao burst out laughing, slapping his own thigh. Qiao Jue sighed, shaking his head woefully.

"Forget the sapling business for now if it's a bother," You Miao said. "I'll talk to second uncle another day."

Knowing You Miao had heard everything, Qiao Jue didn't bother hiding anything. "Screw her, sticking her nose in everything. What can a few tea saplings do to her? It's not like anyone's growing them. Don't worry about this, I'll personally make a trip to the estate tonight. I can't stay in this house any longer."

Qiao Jue ate his meal roughly before he left to change his clothes and depart. Thus, You Miao made himself at home—he took over Qiao Jue's bed, telling Li Zhifeng to get in, too. The two snuggled under the covers. Qiao Jue's bedding was nicely perfumed, and with Li Zhifeng holding him, You Miao sighed appreciatively.

"Little uncle's bed is so comfy."

Li Zhifeng answered him with an "mn" and dropped a light kiss on his lips, the pair falling asleep thus as the night passed. Qiao Jue returned by the fourth watch, and when he saw the two had taken over his bed, he leaned into his chair and took a nap as he was.

At daybreak, Qiao Jue woke the couple. "Rise and shine."

Still bleary-eyed, You Miao groggily boarded the carriage without even washing his face. Li Zhifeng had gone somewhere, and on the road, You Miao leaned into Qiao Jue's arms and slept the entire way. When they reached the pier, the people from the workhouse the day before had already arrived. Qiao Jue went to talk to the ferryman and paid the dockers to haul cargo. Li Zhifeng arrived then, driving a cart. After the six thousand pounds of iron ingots were loaded onto the boat, the vessel drew half a boat's worth of water.

"Eat." Li Zhifeng pulled over a small table and passed a steaming hot bag of fritter sticks wrapped in grease paper to You Miao before he turned around and went to buy a bowl of soy milk from a small shop by the river.

You Miao became more energetic after breakfast, and Li Zhifeng passed steamed buns to the new servants squatting at the riverbank.

"What's your name?" Li Zhifeng questioned.

"Cheng Guangwu," replied the lanky youth as he took the steamed bun.

“I remember you two,” You Miao said to the twins. “Mu Yan and Mu Feng.”

The twins took their steamed buns, but didn’t speak.

There were two other families carrying all of their belongings who had been waiting for a long time. One of the men spoke up, “Shoaye, won’t you give the children something to eat?”

They were Qiao Jue’s new hires; one family was surnamed Niu, and the other Qian. The Niu Family composed of a married couple with a daughter, while the Qian Family was a widowed mother with two teenage sons.

“There’s one for everyone,” Li Zhifeng said, handing out the white buns one by one.

The sky was lightening. After Qiao Jue took a few bites of his fritter stick, he passed it to a child.

“Let’s go,” You Miao said. “What are you waiting for, xiao-jiu?”

Qiao Jue didn’t speak. His expression was clouded, having obviously been angered to the extreme the night before. You Miao sidled over to shamelessly nuzzle against him, acting all cute, and it made Qiao Jue laugh, unable to stay upset.

“Wait a bit longer,” Qiao Jue said.

By the time the fog over the river completely lifted, four carts had arrived—they were loaded full of three-feet-tall tea saplings with their roots wrapped in soil-filled sackcloths. You Miao made an exclamation of delight at the sight.

“Xiao-jiu brought over all the meager assets he owns, eh,” Qiao Jue said. “Take care of me in the future, Miao-zi.”

You Miao laughed. “In the future, as long as I have a bite to eat, you will too. Come, let’s go.”

The five thousand tea saplings were loaded onto the boat, followed by all the people. It was thus that the mighty vessel sailed toward Riverwave Estate.

* * *

An entire year’s work depended on a good start in the spring. Mayhem descended upon Riverwave Estate as soon as spring arrived, and the shouts of the craftsmen could be heard everywhere. Cargo was being unloaded by the riverbank where basswood was strewn all over the ground—some had

their bark already stripped, while others were undergoing the debarking process. It was a mess. The craftsmen had also set up a large tent beside the river. You Miao went over to greet Old Craftsman Huang, then instructed the men to stack the iron ingots by the shore before he led the workers up to Shen Garden.

Qiao Jue hadn't witnessed a sight like this the last time he visited, and he commented, "You're gonna be bringing prosperity to millions of people here, Miao-zi."

You Miao smiled modestly in response and replied, "I don't know about bringing prosperity to millions, but I'll be able to bring prosperity to my own estate at least."

This was the coldest time of the year, but the river still didn't freeze over. When the party entered Shen Garden, they all peered around, obviously having never ever lived in such a wealthy abode.

Qiao Jue chuckled. "Hehe, now I can at last have a taste of living the life of a major household."

You Miao feigned a kick at him and joked, "You're pulling my leg here."

Qiao Jue took his boy servants with him to go tidy things up, intending on settling down in this manor. The dockers carried the tea saplings to Shen Garden, piling them left and right and all over the backyard. You Miao told Li Zhifeng to settle the pay with the workers, then he himself led the new tenant families into the main hall.

"Wait here," You Miao said.

The families were all poor; never had they ever stepped foot into such a wealthy place, so they immediately started singing praises, in awe of Shen Garden's impressiveness. The women waited outside with the children, while the men who were the head of their households entered the hall. As You Miao surveyed the crowd, he noticed that of the twins, only one came inside—they probably assumed only one person per household could come inside; they were fairly perceptive of rules, considering.

You Miao had seen how his father had treated the tenants, so once he was inside the hall, he retrieved tea leaves and personally brewed a pot. As he passed down a round of tea poured in crude cups, he said, "Once you join Shen Garden, you'll be part of my family. If there's anything the matter in the future, we can talk. Come around and pass the tea."

Having the young master of the estate offer tea to the tenants and servants implied that You Miao had formally accepted them. Immediately, with the family head named Zhuang leading, the four families of Zhuang, Huang, Qian, and Niu all came forward to receive the tea.

"Of course we will be loyal to you, shaoye," they all said.

You Miao made a pleased sound and poured another round of tea. "Those of you with children can stay here in Shen Garden for the time being, no rush. Just find a room in the side wing. This year is the first year, so let's worry about planting and survival first. If there isn't enough to eat, just borrow stock from Li Zhifeng."

As soon as You Miao addressed the food issue, the group visibly sighed in relief. However, You Miao added, "But all the grain borrowed in advance this year must be repaid next year with ten percent interest."

"Of course. That's the logical thing. Of course we can't freeload off of shaoye," said the man named Zhuang.

You Miao continued, "Tomorrow, you can mark the land you want. It doesn't matter how much you section off, provided it's within your ability to work it. Fifty percent rent per acre of land."

Given the fact he had spoken, although the men might not be quite willing, they had no choice but to nod.

With a grin, You Miao continued, "My estate can yield three seasons of grain annually. If you don't believe me, you can try it yourselves. You all saw on your way here, right? The waterwheel is there to provide water come spring. If three harvests can't be achieved, I'm a fairly easy-going person; the rent can be lessened come year-end."

The men finally breathed a sigh of relief when they heard this.

Finally, You Miao concluded, "Those of you expecting to lease and work the land, go take your rest now; plowing will commence tomorrow. When the seeds arrive, I'll pass them out."

The four households that came by boat all bowed and stood down to leave. This was when You Miao finally remembered the man named Song from the people market the day before, and realized he hadn't come. He had probably run off with the money. Although You Miao was upset, there was nothing he could do except take it as a robbery and let it go.

The only ones who now remained in the hall were the darkly tanned skinny youth Cheng Guangwu, and the sallow-faced twins who were so

starved they were skin and bones.

"Let me work the fields, too," Cheng Guangwu said. "I'll rent an acre of land. Will shaoye be charging fifty percent too?"

You Miao looked at him, amused. "You know how to work the fields?"

Cheng Guangwu was momentarily stumped by the question, but quickly answered, "I don't, but I can learn."

"The land in the northeast corner of Shen Garden is a good piece of land, I'll let you farm it," You Miao said. "We'll split it fifty-fifty; I'll provide the seeds, but you have to go with whatever I want to plant. After the seeds are sown, you can manage it however you want. I'll provide you with meals, but when you're not busy, you'll have to take care of my two horses and all the nitty gritty business of the manor. If my little uncle calls for you, you'll have to do what he tells you to, too."

It was an act of divine grace that You Miao would cover Cheng Guangwu's boarding and meals, let him work the land behind Shen Garden, and even split half of the harvest for him to sell. Cheng Guangwu promptly nodded and left.

Now the only ones left were the twins Mu Yan and Mu Feng. You Miao contemplated—should he place them inside the chamber to wait on him? He didn't have very many things for them to do. Have them cook? Judging by their builds, they wouldn't even know where to start. Have them act as gardeners to tend to the flowers and bushes? That seemed a little too leisurely. The brothers were over ten years of age and looked rather pitiful, what with their ragged dirty clothes—they looked like two little monkeys.

In the end, You Miao decided, "Go find Li Zhifeng. Do whatever he tells you to."

"Yes, sir." Mu Yan bowed and left with his little brother in tow.

The brothers weren't like the tenants. The others had come to lease the land to work, and at the end of the day, they were still working for themselves. Even Cheng Guangwu had proclaimed that he was only working for himself, not selling himself. However, the twins had sold themselves to bury their father, so they had to sign a slave deed with You Miao—they had pressed their fingerprints to notarize the sale at the market, and the contracts were all drawn up. It was within You Miao's rights to command them as he pleased. But You Miao was an easy-going person, so naturally, he wouldn't buy a slave just to act bossy and beat them up for fun

like Li Yan. He was someone who returned a single good gesture tenfold, and he believed that people like Li Zhifeng would be unhesitatingly loyal to him for life as long as he treated him well.

Just as You Miao's thoughts drifted to Li Zhifeng, the man in question entered.

"Have they all been dismissed?" You Miao asked.

"Yes," Li Zhifeng replied.

"I told those two boys to follow you," You Miao said.

"Yes, they told me."

"What did you end up having them do?"

"Take a bath," Li Zhifeng said.

You Miao laughed and pulled Li Zhifeng to sit while he went to change out the tea set, tossing the teacups the tenants had used earlier into a copper basin to sanitize with boiled water later.

"Well, that's all the work, then. Let's have some tea."

"I'll be going to Guozhuang and Anlu to forge iron in the afternoon," Li Zhifeng informed him.

It was then that You Miao finally remembered they still had to fabricate chains and other mechanical parts, make plows and hoes and scythes, purchase bamboo to build scaffolding, hire temp labor to till the soil to plant tea for Qiao Jue, procure rapeseed seeds, find beekeepers, buy fry[3]… He was ready to burst into tears on the spot.

"Why does the work never end? I feel like a spinning top," You Miao lamented.

Li Zhifeng grinned. "A cup of tea first."

You Miao retrieved a teapot and brought down two cups from the shelf. "My mom passed this to me. Ruyao's cups."

"Mn." Li Zhifeng examined them seriously.

You Miao eyed him and repeated, "*Ruyao's*!"

Li Zhifeng returned the gaze, confused.

You Miao deflated, feeling defeated. He should've known Li Zhifeng didn't know these things. He explained, telling the truth, "It's fake. It can only be used to fool that cheap older brother of mine, who doesn't know anything. Though I do want a real set."

The ceramic of the tea set shimmered with the colors of incense ash, the quality of their bodies fine and smooth.

"Is it expensive?" Li Zhifeng asked.

"Mhm." You Miao had originally wanted to fool him, but he didn't realize Li Zhifeng wouldn't recognize Ruyao wares. He straightened his face and said, "If this was authentic Ruyao, then this tea set would be worth our entire estate."

Li Zhifeng nodded slowly as You Miao brewed a pot of Biluochun. The folk name of Biluochun was "Shockingly Fragrant." The moment the vibrantly green tea swirled into the cup, the fragrance of tea immediately tackled one's nose.

"There's only one pot, but plenty of cups…" You Miao mumbled. "Just like an old master with a bunch of wives…"

Li Zhifeng snorted and laughed, unable to help himself. In good humor, You Miao noted, "My dad said that."

"Us Quanrong," Li Zhifeng said, "We're only good to one person in our entire lifetime, living steadfast until the end. Sons and daughters, before or after death…none of that matters."

You Miao hummed in response. "We Han like to have multiple wives and concubines, like my dad."

"And you?"

Li Zhifeng's long, slender fingers lifted his teacup. The middle and forefinger of the other hand were pressed together to support the bottom of the cup—acting surprisingly proper, and in perfect form. His handsome grace was truly heart-stopping. You Miao suddenly realized that somehow, before he'd noticed it, this man was no longer his slave.

You Miao flashed a smile, but didn't answer. Li Zhifeng drank his tea and answered for him.

"Of course you'll want many wives and concubines, too."

"Not necessarily," You Miao replied absently, raising the pot to refill Li Zhifeng's cup. "Depends on the person, I guess."

Li Zhifeng finished his second cup of tea, and the two sat in silence. Neither spoke, but the air remained peaceful in the room. You Miao turned his gaze outside, feeling dazed. All of a sudden, the idea of not marrying sprouted in his mind.

He had always been rebellious—perhaps he had inherited his father's temperament. Perhaps he was already resistant to the books he'd been studying all these years and considered teachings like *"The greatest of the three unfilial ways is to bear no posterity*[4]*"* to be complete bull. But at the end of the day, maybe parental influences on him were the greater pull—his mom was a wickedly clever beauty, and his dad a talented but defiant scholar.

To marry, take a wife, and have a bunch of children… Somehow, You Miao felt all of that was so remote when it came to him. If he could choose, then he might as well never form a family. He'd simply stick with Li Zhifeng and live out their little lives like this. The old man favored You Hange anyway, so let *him* fill the halls with children and grandchildren. The previous master of Shen Garden had been alone, so maybe moving here really wasn't a good omen…

You Miao's thoughts drifted all over the place, and the more he thought, the farther his mind wandered. It was Li Zhifeng who ended up breaking the silence.

"I'm off. Gonna go forge iron."

You Miao sighed and nodded. As Li Zhifeng exited the door, he saw the already-bathed twins and pointed to one.

"You. Come with me." Then he pointed to the other one and said, "You. Follow the young master and wait for his orders."

Li Zhifeng left with Mu Yan in tow, while Mu Feng remained standing properly by the door.

"Come in," You Miao beckoned. When Mu Feng did as he was told, You Miao ordered, "Tidy things up here. Careful not to break anything."

As Mu Feng gingerly cleaned and put away the tea set, You Miao rose to his feet and stood near the veranda, staring off into space with his hands clasped behind him. Mu Feng joined him moments later after he finished his task, and quietly stood behind him to wait for orders.

You Miao turned his head to appraise the boy. Mu Feng's face had been washed clean and his hair was also much smoother, but his clothes were nonetheless still dirty and tattered. When standing, he was a head shorter than You Miao.

I'll need to find a seamstress to make a couple of sets of clothes for these people, You Miao thought as he walked into the backyard. The entirety of Shen Garden was being tidied up; with the four tenant families settling in, there was immediately a sense of life as bustling noise and children's spirited voices filled the side wings. It was a harmonious and merry atmosphere. Of course, there was no way You Miao was going to let them live here forever. Once the Autumn harvest this year was over, he would have them go build their own dwellings.

"Laoye."

"Greetings, laoye!"

The tenants greeted You Miao when they caught sight of him. One was smoking tobacco while a few others were sitting by the well, chatting.

You Miao acknowledged them with a nod and said, "Just call me 'shaoye.' I'm not old yet."

The widow named Qian came over with a smile. "Shaoye, we were just talking… I can't work the fields, so how about I cook for you?"

"Sure." *Perfect*, You Miao thought. "It'd be great if you can help out. I'll pay you fifteen coins a day."

Widow Qian quickly declined, "Oh no, how can I take shaoye's money?"

She glanced at her two sons, one of whom was already eighteen while the younger one was only sixteen—You Miao couldn't remember their names—and Widow Qian was over thirty. You Miao was adamant, so Widow Qian hastily declined again.

"Shaoye is already granting us a living. It's within my duties to come help."

You Miao nodded at last. "Li Zhifeng can't get to everything by himself, either, so we'll go with that for now. Everything is provided in the kitchen, so when he comes back, just go to him to retrieve the rice and noodles from storage."

You Miao went around the yard of the side wing once. He saw the Niu family was heating water to bathe the children, and the two kids were laughing as they rioted in the wooden basin. It made him smile, and after detouring around them, he left to return to the backyard.

There was an archway in Shen Garden's backyard, and the crescent moon entrance led to the courtyard where Tang Wan once lived—it was

named Tingzhuhai, or “To Listen to the Sea of Bamboo.” It was situated right across from the east wing in which You Miao resided, separated by a large pond in between. Spanning the dried pond was the boardwalk of a bridge that winded here and there. Once water came to fill the void, it would certainly become quite an exquisite little world of its own.

When gazing out of You Miao’s bedroom window, one could see the bamboo grove, and facing it was the small Tingzhuhai courtyard. Qiao Jue was having his boy servants clean up the place in preparation for settling there.

“*Can’t eat without meat, can’t live without bamboo*,” recited You Miao as he stood grinning outside the yard, his hands tucked in his sleeves. He could hear the plucking of zither strings from within.

Qiao Jue’s voice continued the recitation languidly, “*No meat makes one skinny, no bamboo makes one common.*[5] Miao-zi, you’ve got a really nice place here.”

The surroundings had already been renovated by Da-Liang and Xiao-Liang. The bamboo grove rustled with the wind. Qiao Jue had changed into a set of long white robes. The hems were embroidered with patterns of clouds, and he said as he fastened a jade pendant onto the side of his belt, “All the bamboo out here is mottled bamboo, over a hundred years old. Even the salt merchant’s house in Yang Prefectural City couldn’t ask for a wooded garden like this. If one day you find yourself short of money, just dig this bamboo out and sell it—two taels of silver apiece—and you’ll lack for nothing.”

You Miao joked, “And here I was thinking of how to save money—I was going to chop up all the bamboo and use it to build the scaffolding.”

Caught between tears and laughter, Qiao Jue smacked You Miao across the backside of his head. “Burning zithers for firewood, cooking cranes; what a waste of beauty. Come, follow me. Let’s go take a look at the tea saplings.”

You Miao hadn’t had a chance before now to inspect the saplings, so now that Qiao Jue was free, he took him to the backyard. Cheng Guangwu was there organizing all the three-feet-tall saplings. Qiao Jue went over to help him move them.

“These are all top-grade Dragon Well. Take a look. This branch, the patterns on the leaves…do you get it?”

You Miao didn’t know much about the growing of teas, so he could only shake his head at the question. Thus, Qiao Jue gave him a detailed lesson on how to grow tea trees—the type of soil and water used, how to pick the leaves, and how to care for them throughout the four seasons. You Miao memorized each item of note.

To cap it off, Qiao Jue said, “Now we gotta hire temp laborers. All of these tea trees will need to be planted within the next three days. I don’t think you have enough tenants here, so we’ll need to go out to recruit some workers.”

“So soon?” You Miao was surprised.

Qiao Jue lectured him with a straight face. “People delay tea for one season, and tea will delay people for one year. This can’t wait. I’ve already checked out the soil on the north side. It’s indeed good land, so now we just need to loosen the soil to prepare for sowing.”

“I’ll go with you and recruit some temp labor in Guozhuang,” You Miao said. “I only just greeted their Village Chief the other day.”

Qiao Jue nodded. You Miao told Cheng Guangwu to guard the house while he and Qiao Jue left for Guozhuang, with his uncle’s two boy servants in tow. This time, there was no Li Zhifeng to carry him across the river, so the four descended via the small path by the riverside and crossed the river to Jiangbei on a ferry before they hired a carriage from the market to head to Guozhuang.

[Chapter 17]

With Qiao Jue around, everything immediately became much easier. He and the Village Chief of Guozhuang Village chatted about everything under the sun, and it took no time for them to decide that the temp laborers would go loosen and water the soil at the estate the very same day. While at Guozhuang, You Miao also ran into Li Zhifeng and Mu Yan, who were examining the blueprint drawings.

Money makes the world go ‘round. As soon as Riverwave Estate started spending, Guozhuang also joined the hustle and got busy right quick; the bustle rivaling even New Year’s. The blacksmiths, having received their pay, had begun to fabricate iron parts according to Old Craftsman Huang’s drawings while You Miao watched from the side.

“What do you want to eat for dinner?” Li Zhifeng asked You Miao.

“Mrs. Qian said she’ll be cooking for us,” You Miao replied, “so we don’t have to hurry back.”

Li Zhifeng gave a nasal acknowledgment and said, “When I arrived earlier, I saw that the market had those little inch-long fish. I’ll buy some and deep-fry them for you when we get home.”

When Qiao Jue was done recruiting labor and negotiating wages, You Miao reached for his money pouch to pay, but was stopped by his uncle.

“Your little uncle still has enough money for this, at least,” Qiao Jue said. “I can’t just freeload off of you. Since I’m already using your land, it’d be poor form to use your money too.”

You Miao scoffed and laughed. “You and I don’t have to be like that.”

Qiao Jue turned serious, however, and said with a straight face, “I’ve got something to discuss with you, Miao-zi.”

Qiao Jue draped his arm over You Miao’s shoulder as they headed toward the river, and You Miao knew they were finally going to talk about money. To be honest, You Miao wouldn’t mind even if Qiao Jue wouldn’t split any shares with him—after all, Qiao Jue would be lending his assistance in the estate’s management, and the man was a good manager that could be found nowhere else.

“Growing tea will take at least two to three years,” You Miao started. “Xiao-jiu, we’ve been close since we were little, so there’s no need to fret about the small things between us. When the tea starts sprouting, you can

just share some with me for a taste. It's not like I planned on growing tea trees when I first came to this estate anyway—"

"Not possible!" Qiao Jue cut him off, instantly outraged. "You're my nephew, how can I possibly do that to you? I understand your goodwill, though, so I won't bring up rent. Once the tea is ready, we'll split fifty-fifty every year…"

"No, no, no. That won't do."

You Miao waved furiously, like he'd been bitten by a snake. Nevertheless, Qiao Jue pushed on.

"Then what's the cut, would you say? Going by your dad's standards?"

Now You Miao was even more speechless. His dad took seventy percent cuts—practically a blood-sucking leech. But just as he was about to respond, Qiao Jue grinned at him.

"I'll cover the growing, the picking, and the roasting, and you take care of sales in the imperial capital's market. How's that?" Qiao Jue said. "The work will be divided equally; we'll be business partners. As for me using your land—let's consider that as me taking slight advantage of you. I'm sure you've got plenty of rich friends in the capital as well, and building those relationships will cost something if you'll be traveling back and forth in the coming year. If this doesn't fly with you, how about you buy my tea after it's sprouted to resell?"

Thinking about it this way, You Miao felt that his little uncle was right and nodded. "Xiao-jiu, to be honest with you, I actually don't have much money," he confessed. "Building this waterwheel alone is scraping the bottom of my purse. You'll have to believe in me for the next few years. Let's make that deal."

"Of course I knew that." Qiao Jue laughed. "Like you have any money. If you need anything, just come to me."

At last, You Miao was reassured.

Qiao Jue added, "Once your waterwheel is complete, I'll need to connect a moso bamboo pipe to bring some of that water from Jiangnan for irrigation. You know the business of planting trees; all you usually need is just some rain, and it'll be fine. It doesn't require much more water than that, so I won't take too much from you."

You Miao quickly consented, and Qiao Jue added, “I’ll be heading to Liu Prefecture to procure some moso bamboo, then. You can go on back first.”

Qiao Jue hired a carriage to go to Jiang Prefectural City. There was a large forest of moso bamboo in the northwest of Liu Prefecture, which bordered Jing Prefecture, and therefore they produced the bamboo in great abundance. However, a roundtrip there required at least a couple of days.

“I’ll look after the temp laborers tomorrow and give them work to do,” You Miao said.

As Qiao Jue prepared to depart, he said, “No rush. My servant boy Jinbao-er is familiar with what needs to be done, so with him supervising, you don’t have to personally go to the mountainside.”

With his piece said, Qiao Jue mounted the carriage and took off, leaving everything arranged in perfect order—labor negotiations done, and supervision in place. It was as if he could do the work of three men by himself. Because of him, everything formally began to move forward. You Miao had to click his tongue in awe. Someone experienced in managing a household was truly exceptional.

“Learn from him,” You Miao told Li Zhifeng, teasing.

“Mn.” Li Zhifeng nodded and said, “Grocery time. Let’s go.”

Li Zhifeng was always so calm and laid back, free as lone clouds and wild cranes. Every time You Miao became overwhelmed and stressed out by all the matters piling on, all he had to do was turn to Li Zhifeng, who’d always respond with a few simple words like “Mn,” “Got it,” “All right, I’ll get to it right now,” or “Let’s go”—this was what he’d say no matter what You Miao spilled out, and it made him feel as if all his trifling troubles had been cut cleanly away by a big pair of scissors.

Still amused, You Miao turned to the twins and said, “Watch and learn as well, you two. Do more, say less.”

“Yes, sir,” Mu Feng said.

“Understood, shaoye,” Mu Yan said.

Their responses were practically made from the same mold as Li Zhifeng’s, and You Miao couldn’t help but laugh out loud, wheezing and hugging his belly. Together, the pair went to the marketplace by the lower riverbank with the twin brothers in tow.

Li Zhifeng instructed the brothers, “Come every day to buy meat and fish. The young master likes to eat fish. Eggs are best purchased on the day of.”

As Li Zhifeng taught the boy servants how to purchase groceries, Mu Feng and Mu Yan listened while You Miao, leaning against Li Zhifeng, watched them with a smile.

“Change up what you buy every so often, vary the flavors,” Li Zhifeng continued. Mu Yan nodded.

“If there’s something you guys want to eat, you can grab it once in a while, too,” You Miao piped up, hanging off of Li Zhifeng’s shoulder. Then he gave Li Zhifeng’s head a poke and said, “This guy likes to eat meat. He needs to eat at least one pound of meat a day, and best if it’s pork belly.”

“Understood, shaoye,” Mu Yan said.

“As for you two brothers and Cheng Guangwu, you will get a stipend of five coins a day for groceries, to be taken from my account,” Li Zhifeng said.

“What about the other four families?” You Miao asked.

“They will go on Lord Uncle’s account.”

You Miao nodded, understanding that this was thanks to Qiao Jue knowing he had no money and helping him carry the financial burden. At the market, Li Zhifeng spent eighty coins to buy a pound of pork belly, a fish, and a fat duck.

That evening, Mrs. Qian began her work at the stoves. Li Zhifeng watched her for a bit from outside the kitchen before ordering Mu Yan to tidy the study and Mu Feng to butcher a duck in the yard. As smoke rose through the chimney, the delicious aroma of dinner filled the yard. Sparkling rice was served along with four dishes and one soup. There was braised meat simmered in a thick clay crock with aged sweet rice wine, and top-grade pork belly that was perfectly marbled, glistening and dripping with fat. There was a large bowl of fried duck with ginger—after the head and neck were removed, the parts thickest with meat were diced and then fried with peanuts. a plate of white and tender fish, perfectly steamed with all of its bones removed, and a pot of fish head and tofu soup splashed with a dash of sesame oil, emitting a thick and delicious aroma. Last but not least, there was a small bowl of steamed egg that Li Zhifeng had made for You Miao.

Li Zhifeng lifted his sleeve and poured You Miao a cup of heated liquor before he stood back behind him and serviced the meal. With the butler by his side and the boy servants in waiting outside the door, You Miao thought as he sat down, *The hard times are finally over!*

For the first time since he'd come to Riverwave Estate, there was finally some semblance of his young master-ness. You Miao spent a moment sighing with mixed emotions, silently choking back tears, before he said expressionlessly, "Sit."

"I will serve you," Li Zhifeng said evenly.

"Sit," You Miao demanded again. "It's dull to eat by myself."

Only then did Li Zhifeng sit down. Three, two, one—the pair dug in and inhaled everything. You Miao's chopsticks plucked at the fish, clearing the meat as he furiously piled it into his bowl while Li Zhifeng also added to his bowl from the other dishes.

Mrs. Qian's cooking was partial to salt, so much so that it made You Miao thirsty the more he ate.

"Why is the food so salty?" he wondered.

"I checked in on the kitchen and told her you prefer a lighter taste. But she said that only rich folks can afford to eat salt, so she added more," Li Zhifeng explained.

You Miao didn't know whether to laugh or cry at that. Although the food was delicious, it was strong in flavor. Nonetheless, he ate vigorously and was only satiated after downing two large bowls of rice and cleaning out the bowl of steamed egg Li Zhifeng had made. Thus was the meal ended—with a cup of tea and a satisfied burp.

As You Miao left the hall, he saw Mrs. Qian sitting and eating on the kitchen's threshold and called out to her. "Mrs. Qian, use less salt next time. Your cooking is good, though. Not even the cook from my dad's house can compare."

Mrs. Qian was hard of hearing. She laughed and said in response, "What? As long as shaoye likes it."

The noisy and animated backyard was bright with firelight. Shen Garden was almost like a theater stage that boomed and drummed, and the sounds of laughter and high voices reached as far as the front yard. You Miao lay in bed, unable to sleep. Many times he'd sit up, curious what all the commotion was, and even thought of joining them for a chat.

However, by the second watch, he heard Li Zhifeng call out to them from beyond the backyard walls.

"Young Master is going to rest. Quiet down."

And thus, the entire Shen Garden gradually fell silent, entering its slumber. You Miao found this endlessly amusing.

Li Zhifeng's voice sounded again moments later. "There's no need to guard at night. You can go to bed."

Once the two boy servants outside the door had left, Li Zhifeng entered the bed chamber and lay down behind the screen. You Miao called out to him.

"Butler, come keep me company in bed."

Li Zhifeng grunted a response and got up to sit by the edge of You Miao's bed. You Miao gave him a kick as he undressed.

"Can't you take more initiative sometimes?" You Miao complained.

Li Zhifeng flashed him a smile, then flicked his fingers and soundlessly snuffed out the oil lamp from the force of air. Quiet descended upon the room, but it didn't last long—soon the air was filled again with You Miao's harsh panting and Li Zhifeng's heavy breathing.

"Man, I love you to death…" You Miao gasped, his voice soft in the dark. "Easy, easy…*ah*!"

"Me too." Li Zhifeng rasped, his voice low and deep. You Miao was about to say more, but his lips were sealed by Li Zhifeng's kiss.

A long time after found You Miao lying on his side, hugging Li Zhifeng with his head buried in his chest, contently asleep.

The next day, You Miao woke up with an achy, sore back, like he was going to fall apart. To top it off, he was caught—again—by Old Craftsman Huang.

"And here I thought you'd gotten more diligent!" Old Craftsman Huang scolded with a deadly glare. "It's only been a few days and you're back to your lazy ways?!"

Old Craftsman Huang's voice now struck fear in You Miao's heart, and he quickly explained himself, "I overindulged in drink last night. I was wrong; terribly wrong. Master, don't be mad."

"And where did these little beggars come from?!" Old Craftsman Huang glared, his beard bristling, and he raised his cane to hit the Mu twins.

The two boys didn't dare to provoke a worse rise out of the old man and quickly dodged away.

You Miao had to reason and coax Old Craftsman Huang before he managed to send him to wait in the main hall. After all the ruckus was over, Li Zhifeng came out holding You Miao's clothes and assisted him in getting dressed and washed up.

Old Craftsman Huang had come to inquire about the parts fabrication's progress, so You Miao called Mu Yan over to give a full report. Li Zhifeng waited until You Miao rose to his feet before he set off to town to procure whatever You Miao had instructed him to purchase. When lunchtime came, You Miao hosted a whole tableful of dishes and accompanied Old Craftsman Huang for the meal, pouring him wine as well, until the old man was flushed and tipsy and wobbly when he left at last.

After lunch, You Miao returned to the backyard to check on things. Most of the people had gone to section off the land; he had instructed them the day before not to draw their plots too close to each other, to ensure room for expansion in the future. Meanwhile, Qiao Jue's boy servant Jinbao-er had gone to supervise the temp workers in Jiangbei. All of a sudden, there was not a single soul within the manor.

It was just as well that there wasn't anybody around—he could use the time to focus on his own things. He'd been so busy in the past few days that his feet barely stopped; he'd been slacking in his studies, and it was time to pick them back up.

Today was already the twelfth. In another few days, he would have to make a trip back to Sunshower Tea Estate to eat with You Dechuan. He had few possessions to his name, so when the time came, he would simply take Li Zhifeng and two jugs of wine with him. Everyone else could relax and stay behind. You Miao didn't really want You Dechuan to taste such good wine, but no doubt Madam Wang would be laughing at him in her head if he showed up empty-handed. A guy's gotta have face the same way trees must have bark. The thought alone irritated him, though.

It was rare to have an idle day with nothing to do. You Miao entered the study to organize and review all that had happened.

The estate land had been reclaimed, but tenants were still lacking. Something like that couldn't be rushed, though. He had to take his time recruiting. As of right now, there were seven households leasing three

hundred and fifty acres of land. There might be too much land, and You Miao worried that not all of it could be sown in a short period of time. He would have to fabricate new tilling tools somehow—thankfully, there was still iron left over. Thus, the afternoon was spent scribbling and doodling according to the engineering books. Once You Miao had produced some drawings, he sent Mu Yan off with them to have the items made.

The waterwheel's construction was near completion, and the canal had been dug as well. There were already small canals from a century ago crisscrossing through Riverwave Estate, which meant all the fields on the estate could be sown as long as the main canals brought in water. Rapeseed seeds needed to be procured as soon as possible, so that matter would have to climb on the list of priorities. They would have to get on with planting the rapeseed as soon as the tilling tools were made.

When the waterwheel was done, a thousand-yard-long moso bamboo pipe would need to be installed in order to draw water from Jiangnan to Jiangbei. Tying bamboo pipes together one by one along the cable that connected the two shores would suffice, however, there were already clear springs atop of the hills of Jiangbei—the water flowed from Guozhuang and crossed through Jiangbei before joining the river. The moso bamboo pipes would only be there to serve as a fallback.

It would probably be best if they built a suspension bridge as well. Every time he wanted to go to Jiangbei, You Miao found it incredibly annoying to have to take the path to the lower basin, walk five miles to reach the pier, then take the ferry. Once he arrived at the other shore, he would then need to hike up the hills—and trekking up and down like that killed him. After Qiao Jue planted his tea, he would hire tea pickers, who would *also* need the suspension bridge. The bridge would join the north and the south, and when the number of people crossing inevitably increased, it would warrant a paved road that would connect to the official road of Anlu Village in the south.

As soon as You Miao's time freed up, he began to think about adding interesting and weird little contraptions to his own estate. There were way too many fascinating things recorded in *"Exploitations of the Works of Nature,"* such as hydro-powered grain grinders. He could build a small waterwheel by the canal and connect it to the gears inside the mill, which would eliminate the need for a donkey pulling the grinder. That way, if any

of the tenants wanted to grind anything, all they had to do was haul their stuff over. There were also grain-pounding mortars, wooden winnowing devices…

Zhang Er arrived and put a saddlebag down on the ground before he greeted You Miao from outside the door of the study.

"Good day, shaoye."

"Come on in," You Miao replied lazily. "Mu Feng! Mu Feng, go draw some water from the well and get tea from the third compartment of the lattice shelf. We'll brew some."

As Mu Feng left to retrieve the tea set, Zhang Er commented with a smile, "There's plenty of people in the manor now. How lively."

You Miao yawned. "If you want, you can move in too."

Zhang Er smiled politely and said, "I'd love to, but I worry that shaoye will find me a nuisance."

"It's fine, just move yourself in," You Miao said. "And when you're not busy, you can chat with my boy servants and keep them company. My little uncle is staying here too, so if you run into any questions in your studies, you can ask him to teach you. While you're at it, you can also help take care of that part of the backyard."

Mu Feng brought the water to a boil, and You Miao passed Zhang Er a cup of tea. He stared at the book in his hand, transfixed. He wanted to make every item he saw in it—he wanted to build a dyehouse, open a teahouse, and then a silkworm room for spinning silk… Speaking of which, the matter of growing mulberries hadn't been settled yet… He'd forgotten about it again.

There was much to be done, and You Miao had to grab Zhang Er's inked brush and record everything on paper—except all he wanted to do was scream. There really was way too much to do! *And everything needed money*!

Zhang Er was reading his book, but he noticed You Miao's expression change a million times in a matter of seconds—sometimes it was one of panic, sometimes horror, and sometimes fury. He thought perhaps You Miao had lost his mind.

There was noise outside just then, but You Miao didn't need to look up to know it was Li Zhifeng—the puppy didn't bark when he was the one coming home.

“Back?” You Miao said.

“Yes.” Holding out some cloth in his hand, Li Zhifeng said, “These are the fabrics chosen for you. Let the tailor take your measurements and make you clothes.”

You Miao cast a glance at the proffered pieces of cloth and said, “Leave it, I don’t have money for that. Just make two sets of clothing for each of the boy servants and it’ll be fine.”

“You still need clothes,” Li Zhifeng said as he swept You Miao up and set off with a straight face.

You Miao yelped and wailed, swinging his legs up and down as he cried, “Let me die! There’s so much to do, I can’t do it aaaall!”

Li Zhifeng finally set You Miao down when they reached the reception hall, where an awaiting old tailor watched them with amusement. As the tailor measured You Miao’s arms and legs, You Miao said expressionlessly, “Make a set for yourself too.”

Li Zhifeng nodded and said, “What else do you need done? I’ll get on it.”

You Miao passed the list to Li Zhifeng, but he only said a simple “Got it” after throwing it a nonchalant glance. You Miao didn’t know whether to laugh or cry at that. It was as if whenever an enormous, godforsaken problem was thrusted at Li Zhifeng, the only response he would utter was *“Got it.”*

* * *

Each of the boy servants at home had changed into a new set of indigo robes, complete with square hats that Li Zhifeng had gotten made for them. Impressively, the resulting transformation gave them the air of a proper, mannered house.

The next day, Qiao Jue returned with a large batch of moso bamboo. He said with a smile, “I see there are still a few hundred acres of land behind the tea plantation. It’s a shame to let it go to waste, so I bought some mulberry seedlings. Wanna try planting some?”

You Miao was going to burst with joy; Qiao Jue really was too capable. The tradesmen installed the bamboo pipes that same day, and Qiao Jue left to check on his tea plantation. While he was at it, he would hire some hands to plant mulberry trees.

The thirteenth of the lunar month was a fortuitous day to break ground, and Old Craftsman Huang came over to have You Miao set up the opening feast. The waterwheel construction was going to begin at last. You Miao went to town and bought a whole pig, twenty pounds of eggs, and both live and dried fish. All the women of the estate came to help out, and cooked up a large feast by the riverside. With Old Craftsman Huang leading the ritual, all the craftsmen lit up incense and raised their cups. The first bow for the heaven and the earth, the second bow for the founding grandmaster, and the third bow to the river god.

The craftsmen ate their feast, set off firecrackers, and then began work on the waterwheel. You Miao had never witnessed such a massive ordeal before. All the locals within a ten-mile radius had hauled their whole families out to watch, pointing and chattering excitedly about how the young master of Riverwave Estate was someone who did great things.

The iron parts fabricated in Guozhuang and Anlu were delivered one after the other, and they were loaded to be hauled up the cliff. Just by watching from the side, You Miao thought that the height they needed to reach was horrifying. Old Craftsman Huang personally planted the canister of explosives on the cliff wall and lit the wick. With a thundering boom, a large hole was blown on the side of the cliff and debris shot far into the distance.

The moment the construction for the waterwheel began, You Miao felt as though an enormous weight was lifted from his shoulders—half of the work was practically done. Thus, he was in an indescribably good mood the entire day.

You Miao watched the work go on for a while before he left to check out the tea plantation in Jiangbei. The tea saplings had all been sown, and they were lined up in order, row after row. Qiao Jue just so happened to be supervising the sowing of mulberry saplings, and he let out a laugh when he saw You Miao.

“Nephew, why don’t we call our tea ‘Riverwave Dragon Well’ in the future?” Qiao Jue said.

You Miao laughed. “Sure. And when the time comes, I’ll go sell it at the capital. The rich folks there love to drink Dragon Well; I guarantee we’ll be able to sell it for a tael of gold per pound!”

The two threw their heads back and laughed. The next morning, You Miao got up early. Just as he was about to set off to stroll around his own land again, Li Zhifeng entered the room with a new set of robes. Only then did You Miao remember that he was to return to Sunshower Tea Estate on the fifteenth of the lunar month. All the enthusiasm he had when he'd gotten out of bed completely dissipated.

As You Miao dressed and scrutinized himself in the mirror, Li Zhifeng asked, "Who else are you bringing?"

"Just you is fine," You Miao answered listlessly. "Get two jugs from the cellar and we can go."

It took a day and a half to travel from Riverwave Estate to Sunshower Tea Estate by carriage. With the construction at home on his mind, You Miao wanted to travel faster, so they would forgo the vehicle and ride on horseback directly. Li Zhifeng tethered the two jugs of wine onto a horse's back while You Miao went to give Qiao Jue a heads up that he was making a trip back to Sunshower Tea Estate, and that he would return in two days.

You Miao and Li Zhifeng decided that they would ride the same horse. Just as they were about to depart, however, Old Craftsman Huang came knocking.

"Boy! What about your promise? I'm short of laborers just now, so I've come to get the help from you!"

"Huh?" You Miao was lost.

Old Craftsman Huang dragged You Miao to the riverside, and only then did You Miao recall that he had promised to have Li Zhifeng help nail in the iron bearing tracks that stabilized the waterwheel axles. Li Zhifeng was strong; he alone could nail the work that took five to six craftsmen together to do.

"Li Zhifeng is accompanying me home today. It's only for one night. Let's revisit this when we come back," You Miao said.

"How can you wait until you come back?" Old Craftsman Huang exclaimed angrily. "Putting this off for a day is wasting a whole day's worth of work! It's windy by the river and the sun's hot—even if you're willing to pay up, I ain't willing to wait."

Then what? You Miao was stumped. He looked at Old Craftsman Huang, then looked at Li Zhifeng.

Li Zhifeng spoke up, "I'll do it."

“Then what about me?” You Miao asked.

The two stood by the riverbank to come up with a plan.

“Get someone else to go with you?” Li Zhifeng suggested. “I just don’t know if the journey…”

You Miao contemplated the idea, but that was all they could really do. He had thought to ride the horse over himself alone, but Li Zhifeng adamantly vetoed it.

“Have Cheng Guangwu accompany you.”

Li Zhifeng called Cheng Guangwu over, then told him to take You Miao to the pier on horseback. They would then take the ferry to Jiang Prefectural City before taking the path to Sunshower Tea Estate by foot—this way, they could reach their destination within a day. At first, You Miao thought that it’d be trouble for Cheng Guangwu to take him on horseback when they weren’t well-acquainted. Yet as it turned out, Cheng Guangwu knew how to ride a horse and the ride was rather steady. After they crossed the river and exited Jiang Prefectural City, they went down Tea Horse Road. They spurred the horse to gallop the entire way, and surprisingly, they managed to run two hundred and fifty miles in one day. They arrived at Sunshower Tea Estate by evening.

Lanterns lined the entirety of the estate, enveloping it in a sea of bright red light that glowed with jubilant cheer. All the decorations—the colorful ribbons, the banners, and the lanterns—created a festive atmosphere. However, the sight of it filled You Miao with sadness. This used to be his home, a place that he once belonged, but now it didn’t have much to do with him.

“Shaoye?” Cheng Guangwu asked carefully.

“Mn. Let’s go in,” You Miao answered.

Leading the horse, Cheng Guangwu followed after You Miao as they entered the manor.

“The young master has returned!”

“Young master is back!”

Amidst the announcements by the boy servants at the main entrance, You Miao stopped and looked around. That was when You Hange came rushing over, smiling.

“I was gonna say; we’ve been waiting for you all day.”

You Miao didn't hate You Hange the same way he did at the beginning anymore. "I'm back," he replied. "The pouch you gave me last time…it was gold?"

You Hange flashed an embarrassed smile. "Was it enough? If not, I still have a bit more silver in savings."

Madam Wang emerged from the door while the two brothers talked, and when she heard their exchange, her face slightly dropped. You Miao didn't bother to spare her a glance, however.

"The renovations at the estate are almost done. Come by when you're free," You Miao invited.

You Hange smiled and nodded. Madam Wang, however, only stood there beyond the entrance.

"You're back?" she said flatly. "Your dad's been waiting for a long time."

"I brought two jugs of wine to show my respects for him." You Miao ordered the servants to unload said jugs, then turned to Cheng Guangwu. "Xiao-Wu, take the horse to the stables."

Madam Wang left to see to the wine while You Miao and You Hange entered the gardens.

"Li Zhifeng didn't come with you?" You Hange asked.

"He couldn't. There's too much for him to attend to at the estate," You Miao answered. "Where's Dad? I'll go say hello."

"Waiting for you to come to dinner," You Hange said. "Come inside and have some tea. I'll have the servants start the meal."

As the dishes were being set down at the table inside the main hall, You Dechuan emerged. You Miao maintained a lukewarm expression while they conversed.

"How're things at the estate?" You Dechuan asked.

"All right, I guess," You Miao replied tepidly.

"Your mom really loved that place," You Dechuan said.

"Mn. The scene of a celebrity scholar's romantic engagement, Shen Garden."

"You'll have to take good care of that manor." You Miao rolled his eyes, and You Dechuan continued, "When are you traveling to the capital for the exams?"

“I haven’t even taken the Prefectural Exams. We’ll see,” You Miao replied.

You Dechuan nodded slowly. After the father and his sons took their meals together, You Miao returned to his room to rest. It was still that same room as before, and who knows where Muqi-er had gone. Madam Wang was going to have the boy sent to him, but You Miao had dismissed everyone save for Cheng Guangwu.

It was dark and humid inside the room. Cheng Guangwu bent down to start the fire, but at the end of the day, he still wasn’t as attentive as Li Zhifeng. You Miao sat, watching the fire in a daze and thinking to himself about how Li Zhifeng was better.

“Shaoye, everything’s been tidied,” Cheng Guangwu said.

“You can make a bed on the floor behind the screen and sleep there,” You Miao said.

Cheng Guangwu nodded, then stole a glimpse at You Miao. You Miao caught the look and arched his eyebrows.

“What is it?” he asked. Cheng Guangwu shook his head, but You Miao pressed, “Speak if you’ve got something to say.”

You Miao still hadn’t gotten used to this servant, who really didn’t have the same perceptiveness as Li Zhifeng. He didn’t wait to be attended to, and undressed himself before shrinking into the blanket. All he felt in his burrow was cold and damp.

Cheng Guangwu went over to feel the blankets, and You Miao continued prodding. “What’s on your mind?”

“The people here who gossip about shaoye… Can I punch them?” Cheng Guangwu asked at last.

You Miao immediately understood. The servants in the manor had most likely been talking behind his back, and had said things in front of Cheng Guangwu.

“You’re no match for them if you pick a fight right now,” he quickly replied. “When we get back, learn how to fight with Li Zhifeng.”

Cheng Guangwu started to laugh, and You Miao sent him to bed. Lying in his own bed, however, You Miao didn’t feel comfortable at all.

Around second watch time, there was the sound of footsteps approaching outside.

“Didi, have you turned in?”

It was You Hange.

You Miao sat up. “Come on in.”

“If you’ve gone to bed, then never mind. We can talk tomorrow.”

Then he left.

However, You Miao’s sleep had been restless that night. Comfort eluded him, and all he craved was to hurry back to Riverwave Estate. After living so freely for so long in Riverwave Estate, Sunshower Tea Estate no longer felt like home. He had never noticed this before, but the rooms here were gloomy and cramped—honestly, *so* uncomfortable to live in.

Liu Prefecture didn’t have the same nice scenery either, as it wasn’t situated by a river. Here, the mountains and hills rose and dipped, the sun remained elusive, and all was wet and humid. In Riverwave Estate’s spot by the river, the sky was clear and blue and there weren’t as many large enclosure walls. And when he sat in the yard, the immense blue skies tumbled into his eyes…

You Miao tossed and turned and didn’t fall asleep until midnight.

When You Miao woke the next morning, the first thing he sensed was the sweet fragrance of wine.

Cheng Guangwu poked his head in and informed him, “The kitchen broke one of shaoye’s jugs.”

The wine in question was the century-old Champion Red, so the entire manor became choked with the ambrosial fragrance of it even when a single jug was shattered. It alarmed quite a number of people. You Miao could guess without much thought that the butler must not have held the wine with much regard. Well, look where that got him—dozens of silver, gone with a *crack*. Even after You Miao washed up and emerged from his room, everyone in the house was still talking about that jug of wine. You Hange was still scolding the servant who broke it.

“Forget it, let it go,” You Miao said dismissively. “There’s plenty more where that came from. If you want a taste, just come over and grab a jug.”

The first thing You Miao did in the morning was to greet his father. The Deputy County Magistrate had come again, and he was chatting with You Dechuan inside the main hall. You Miao had met this official before. He listened to their conversation quietly in his chair—the topic was the affairs of the imperial capital and the northern frontier.

The northern frontier was stricken with more and more strife by the year. The case of the caravan raid last year had already blown up—many officials were furious after You Deyou's merchant group returned to the capital. They had the defense armies of the six cities reorganize and redeploy along the Yanbian border. However, the northern border stretched for hundreds of thousands of miles—in a domino effect, all the major armed forces had to be restructured.

"When the Third Prince returned, he was also harshly scolded," the Deputy County Magistrate said apathetically. "I hear His Majesty intends to…"

You Miao perked up at the mention of Zhao Chao, and paid closer attention.

"...station him with the military in Goryeo[6] for a while."

You Dechuan shook his head and sighed. "How rough; being conscripted into the army as a prince. And how's the war going between Goryeo and Quanrong?"

The Deputy County Magistrate chuckled. "The Third Prince's maternal clan has no favor, and the imperial court isn't fair to begin with. Now that the prince is gone, who knows when he'll be able to come back? After the crown prince ascends the throne, he'd have even less place to speak. And who knows how many citizens will pour into the Central Plains with the recall of the northern border's defense forces. There are several hundred thousand refugees; this is a big problem."

You Dechuan sent You Miao a look and said, "Go find your brother and talk with him."

You Miao wanted to listen to more of their conversation, but You Dechuan wouldn't let him. There was nothing he could do, so he had to rise and take his leave. When he exited the main hall, however, he didn't go seek out You Hange. Instead, he snuck around to the back of the hall, then, on his tiptoes, he continued to listen in.

You Dechuan's words became much more relaxed after You Miao's departure, and from his father's conversation, You Miao deduced several things.

First: The north was currently in conflict—Goryeo and Quanrong were at war.

Second: The relationship between the Tianqi of the Central Plains and the Five Barbarian Tribes at the northern border was becoming more contentious by the day. The caravan raid You Miao experienced last year wasn't a unique case; there had been five or six consecutive incidents, and the entire imperial court remained in heated argument over the issue. Many officials had collectively signed a petition to declare war on the Barbarians.

Third: The Barbarian Tribes near the six cities of Yanbian had been wreaking havoc, and now the defense had retreated to the three checkpoints of Zheng Liang, West Liang, and East Liang. However, You Miao had been to Zheng Liang Pass before; he knew that there were no markets there, nor was it a suitable place for agriculture. There were at least a hundred thousand people living in the big and small villages near the border, and they were all now migrating southward to the Central Plains. This meant the sixteen prefectures of the Central Plains were in for a long period of disorder.

Fourth: Zhao Chao had been reprimanded, and the military officers under his command had all been disciplined. This Third Prince, who had never cared to form factions with civil officials and loved participating in the military since he was young, was quickly losing favor. He was even driven out of the capital to the Goryeo border, to take command of the campaign there.

The Deputy County Magistrate rose and left after having had his tea, so You Miao quietly paced in the backyard. He didn't care for everyone else, but Zhao Chao had always been good to him. When a friend was in trouble and there was nothing You Miao could do to help, it made him miserable.

Back when he was at the imperial capital, You Miao had already heard about the conflict between the Third Prince and the Crown Prince's factions. The Crown Prince's faction consisted mostly of civil officials, which naturally meant the Third Prince wouldn't be stupid enough to try to force any civil officials onto his side. Thus, he turned to making connections with the military. However, military ranks were much lower than that of civil service, so none of the officers could speak up for him during court assemblies.

Alas. There were always some things in life that couldn't be accomplished.

“Didi?” You Hange’s voice called out.

You Miao snapped out of it and saw his brother approaching.

“Dad was just looking for you to have tea with him,” You Hange said.

You Miao knew You Dechuan was probably scheming something again and went to seat himself inside the tea room. You Dechuan was personally washing the cups and brewing tea—it was a rare occasion today, with just the two of them. Not even You Hange was joining them.

“The servant was careless and broke a jug of your wine. It was good wine, though.”

You Dechuan used this topic to start the conversation, but You Miao was disinterested.

“There’s more at the other estate, no big deal. If you want a taste, then send someone over to grab it.”

“I hear you’re looking for tenant farmers?” You Dechuan asked. “When you leave tomorrow, have your brother take you to Jiang Prefectural City to take a look.”

“Oh.” After listening in on what the Deputy County Magistrate had said in the main hall, You Miao’s mind was occupied. “Are things shaky at the capital?” he asked.

“I was just gonna ask you about that,” You Dechuan said. “Is His Highness the Third Prince still writing you letters?”

Even though he had moved out of Sunshower Tea Estate, You Miao knew everything he did at Riverwave Estate didn’t escape You Dechuan’s eyes. There was no need to lie.

“Yeah.”

“You’ve got to stand on a firm footing. Don’t get involved with him anymore,” You Dechuan said.

Anger immediately flared inside You Miao, and he frowned. “Why?”

“Zhao Chao has gotten himself into a mess in the capital, and you can’t dodge that fast enough. Why would you put yourself on the line? In the future, you will be going to the capital for the imperial state exams—to become an official. If you join his faction, you’ll only be elbowed out of court. How can you gain favor then?”

“Heh, old man, I can’t believe you still remember that business,” You Miao taunted. “Did I ever agree to take the exams?”

“You—!”

“Let me be straight with you—Zhao Chao is my friend,” You Miao stated. “He’s helped me quite a bit. I don’t return kindness with ingratitude.”

“You idiot!” You Dechuan scolded angrily. “Even the Deputy County Magistrate knows he wants to pull you into his camp right now! How can you be so blind?! Here I am, telling your uncle to help pave the way for you at the capital, but you’re there poking a hornet’s nest! Just what are you—”

“Money, money, money! Is money all you know?!” You Miao retorted, refusing to back down. He shouted, “In your eyes, humanity, justice, decorum, wisdom, and respect all amount to money! That’s not what the sages write about in books, you know! ‘Lay down one’s life for one’s principles’—do you know what that means?!”

“When you must choose between loyalty and justice, what would you choose?” You Dechuan was shaking with rage, but that didn’t affect his ability to argue. He lectured, “His elder brother is the crown prince! The future *emperor*! It’s all right if you don’t follow the Crown Prince, but how can you join Zhao Chao?!”

“It’s not like Zhao Chao is going to rebel! So what if I make a friend out of him?!” You Miao rebutted.

You Dechuan’s face immediately dropped at his words, however. He roared, furious, “*The entire You Clan is going to end in your hands*!”

You Dechuan reached for his cane, but the moment You Miao sensed things going south, he got up to make his getaway. It took no more than a few exchanges to compel You Dechuan to beat this rebellious son of his to death—this son who caused him nothing but headaches.

Whether the You Clan would perish in the future was yet to be determined, but You Dechuan felt certain that *he* was to perish—from outrage—sooner or later. He yelled and swung his cane, violently hitting You Miao on the head. The strike made You Miao’s head buzz. He tried to dodge and hide, but Li Zhifeng was nowhere to be found, so he ran off instead.

You Hange came rushing when he heard the commotion and held You Dechuan back. “Dad!”

You Dechuan screamed, “If you still dare to dillydally around with Zhao Chao, then emancipate yourself and leave this clan without a single

penny! I'll just pretend I never had you as a son, so you won't implicate this old man in the future!"

You Miao was being driven mad by how angry he was. He spitefully kicked a flowerpot as he turned and left, shouting, "Cheng Guangwu! Get the hell over here!"

When Cheng Guangwu came running over, You Miao roared, "We're leaving! There's no place for me here in this house! Goddamn old fart! Just you wait! One day I'll flatten your shitty estate!"

Not a single response was uttered from inside the tea room. You Miao yanked Cheng Guangwu's sleeve and pushed him to the stables in the backyard, urging him to bring the horse out. When the two hopped onto the horse, they left by way of the mountain paths.

"Didi! Didi!"

You Hange ran out of the back gate to chase after them, shouting anxiously from behind. However, You Miao was on the verge of tears. He didn't want to say another word, and he didn't hear whatever was shouted at him. You Hange was left in the dust until he was no more than a small dot in the distance as Cheng Guangwu continued to spur the horse to gallop down the mountain.

"Slow down, slow down," You Miao said.

After running wildly on horseback for a stretch of the road, the flames inside You Miao were nearly extinguished by the bumpy ride. Cheng Guangwu slowed the horse to a trotting pace down Tea Horse Road.

You Miao was like a bug-eyed crab just waiting to clamp someone to death with his pair of pincers, but he had no one to vent at. If Li Zhifeng was by his side, he'd scream and throw a fit for sure, and rant for at least two hours.

But with Cheng Guangwu, he didn't know what to say at all.

As soon as they left the estate and the tea hills area, the rays of the early spring spilled down once more. Feeling a little better, You Miao decided he wasn't going to stay upset anymore. As the horse clopped down the path, swaying gently this way and that, You Miao commented on Cheng Guangwu's skill as he rode with a whip in hand.

"Well, your riding is pretty good."

"To answer shaoye, my brother taught me," Cheng Guangwu said.

"Mn."

You Miao was only trying to start a conversation without really anything to say, but Cheng Guangwu asked, “Shaoye doesn’t get along with the other estate?”

“No,” You Miao replied with a huff. “Whatever, let’s just go home. If we hurry, we can still make it home in time for the Yuanxiao feast.”

Cheng Guangwu nodded, then squeezed the horse’s sides with his legs, urging the horse to gallop once more. They left behind the lush green hills of Liu Prefecture and hurried back toward Jiangnan.

[Chapter 18]

As You Miao bumped along on the ride back, his heart rose up and down too. He couldn't quite describe the mixed emotions swirling in him.

The pair made it to the ferry just as evening fell on the day. The Lantern Festival was in full swing, and the locals of both shores were ferrying to and fro, many of them catching the boat to watch plays in Jiang Prefectural City. Standing at the head of the boat, You Miao listened to the bamboo woodwinds, the music of which reverberated along the bright, lantern-lit shores of the Yangtze. The lilting voices of ladies, singing in a southern accent, mingled with the wind. At that moment, You Miao felt nothing but yearning.

He shouldn't have gone back to Sunshower Tea Estate. Had he known what was going to transpire, he would've stayed home. Dragging Qiao Jue and Li Zhifeng out to stroll around Jiang Prefectural City would've been way more fun than arguing with the old man.

Even if he went home to Riverwave Estate now, it would more than likely be submerged in complete darkness by this time; the atmosphere dead. What a loss, what a loss…

After coming ashore from the ferry, Cheng Guangwu led the horse up. However, the instant the two entered Riverwave Estate, You Miao exclaimed in surprise.

All of Shen Garden was decorated with lights and colors, and big red lanterns were hung everywhere! Their bright crimson glow, magnificent and scintillating, illuminated the gardens.

There were two particularly large lanterns that were hanging at the entrance, right next to the establishment plaque. Upon each was written the character for "You."

"The young master has returned!" Cheng Guangwu shouted.

You Miao raced inside and saw two animated revolving lanterns[7] hanging by the spirit screen. The one on the left displayed the words "Blooming Fortune," and the one on the right "Splendid Country." Yuanxiao lanterns made of cotton yarn also lined the hundred or so steps of the path leading from the main entrance to the second entrance, and they were all adorned with calligraphed verses.

Some said: "*At night, the spring breeze adorns a thousand trees with flowers. The petals fall with the wind like a shower of stars.*[8]"

Some said: "*Where will I be when I wake from last night's insobriety? Perhaps only upon a willowy bank, facing a waning moon against the dawn breeze.*[9]"

And some said: "*Pearl tears fall under the bright moon of the vast sea; propitious smoke rises as Lantian jade is warmed by the sun.*[10]"

You Miao stopped beneath one of the lanterns and watched as it revolved. Two of his favorite verses were written on it. He couldn't help but smile as he recited them aloud: "*Long is the journey, a thousand miles of misty waters. Leaden are the evening clouds that loom in the vast southern skies*!"

"You're home?" Li Zhifeng asked, frowning.

That bit of earlier gloom in You Miao's mind had all but dispersed. He replied with a smile, "Yeah, I'm home."

Then he rushed over and pounced on Li Zhifeng, nuzzling and laughing.

"I missed you so damn much."

Qiao Jue was hanging lanterns with the Mu brothers. When he saw You Miao had returned, he chuckled. "Well, look who's here. Didn't you go home to eat the good stuff at your old man's house?"

"Oh my god, don't even talk about it," You Miao said. "We had another fight. Did you guys eat yet?"

"We were just about to. The food's ready," Li Zhifeng answered.

You Miao went to wash his face, all of his previous frustrations swept out the door. When he re-emerged in a fresh set of clothes, a bright full moon was hanging leisurely in the vast night sky. Li Zhifeng had set up the feast in the garden, and noisy, animated, festive merriment enveloped the backyard. It was cheering You Miao up—home was best after all!

"Tang Hui came by today, eh," Qiao Jue mentioned conversationally, sounding interested. "How did you make his acquaintance?"

Something clicked with You Miao, and he asked, "He came by? What did he say?"

Li Zhifeng spoke up from where he was warming the cups and pouring wine. "He brought a letter from Zhao Chao."

“Well, look at you,” Qiao Jue teased. “Don’t forget your little uncle when you rise to become a big-shot official in the future.”

You Miao immediately asked, “Where’s the letter? Let me see.”

“Why don’t you read it after dinner,” Li Zhifeng said.

As if You Miao could sit still. He badgered Li Zhifeng until the man had to relent and retrieve three letters from the study. Aside from Zhao Chao’s letter, there was also one from Li Yan and a note from Tang Hui himself.

You Miao looked at Tang Hui’s note first. It was full of words of gratitude. Tan Hui had actually made a trip to the capital during the start of the new year, which showed that the restructuring of the defense army had been urgent. Ping-Er had certainly given You Miao face as well, and with a stroke of his brush, the Ministry of War approved Tang Hui’s new post.

Tang Hui would be formally transferred back to the capital come the beginning of the spring season, so he had returned to Jiangnan specifically to handle the transition. And since it was on the way, he helped deliver Zhao Chao’s and Li Yan’s letters. You Miao suddenly felt like he’d shot himself in the foot—wouldn’t it have been perfect if Tang Hui had stayed in Yang Prefecture? Now that he was gone, You Miao couldn’t make use of their connection to get things done in Jiangnan. But it was just as well. If You Miao were to go back to the capital himself, there would be someone there to look after him.

“Hey, drink up,” Qiao Jue prompted, “Nephew.”

You Miao’s eyes were still on his letters as he clinked his glass with Qiao Jue, then he clinked glass with Li Zhifeng as well, smiling. “We’re all family here, keep it easy. Pray this year holds favorable weather and life goes well.”

The three then dug in.[11] As You Miao moved on to Li Yan’s letter, he couldn’t help but peer at Li Zhifeng for a reaction. *This letter is from your former master, eh*, he thought. Li Zhifeng’s face was tinged with red. With a single glance, he could tell what You Miao was thinking. He only flashed a smile instead of responding, and put a chicken drumstick in You Miao’s bowl.

Li Yan’s letter was fairly brief, most of it being nothing but polite pleasantries. The tone was much more distant than the first letter, with very

little care for You Miao's wellbeing. You Miao felt his stomach sink; Li Yan had most likely heard rumors as well and could vaguely guess that You Miao and Zhao Chao had gotten closer as of late.

Nevertheless, the affections of the past still remain; Li Yan still helped him out this once by courtesy of the calligraphy and paintings You Miao had gifted him. The only caveat was that if You Miao couldn't make his position clear, then whenever he returned to the capital, the same rich boy circle would no longer take him in.

Although You Dechuan's words weren't the nicest, what he had said was not wrong—the fight between factions in the capital had reached a heated stage and it was impossible not to get pulled in. One had no choice but to seriously consider the options before choosing a camp.

"What does it say?" Li Zhifeng asked, seeing how You Miao's expression had turned ashen.

You Miao shook his head and opened Zhao Chao's letter, not knowing what to say for the moment.

Zhao Chao's letter was dense and packed full of words as always. He first mentioned Tang Hui, telling You Miao that Tang Hui was a capable man, and now that Goryeo and Quanrong were at war, they were in need of skilled men like him. He had attempted on multiple occasions to transfer Tang Hui back to the capital to lead the military campaign to Goryeo together with Nie Dan, but he was never able to get past the Ministry of War. You Miao's accidental deed had helped him big-time.

This made You Miao laugh. He could sense, from those lines alone, that Zhao Chao had endless things to say to him; it was as if he wanted to pull him aside and pour his heart out. You Miao himself was a man of books, so he knew that when it came to pen-pals, those who only did it out of duty found it a huge pain, especially when only three or four sentences were needed. Zhao Chao came from a martial arts background and his writing wasn't particularly graceful, which only emphasized how he didn't usually appreciate scholarly routines. And yet he still responded with such a thick letter—it was obvious how much he valued You Miao.

The letter also brought up the current situation at the capital, as well as the unrest at the border. Now, he'd rather You Miao didn't rush to the capital or associate with him too closely, lest it make life difficult for You Miao at home. Zhao Chao also said the political undercurrents of the

imperial court were moving rapidly; a number of military officers had turned their support to the Crown Prince in order to protect themselves. Zhao Chao himself would soon be going on an expedition to Goryeo. You Miao didn't need to worry, however—Goryeo would inevitably fall; he would just be gone from the capital for a few years.

Zhao Chao also reminded You Miao that he must not make public that the two of them were now close—because You Miao's future didn't end here. Laying low and biding his time now was so he could achieve greater things in the future. As long as they both recognized the friendship in their hearts, it would suffice. Zhao Chao would still send letters after leaving the capital, but to prevent You Miao from facing difficulties at home, he advised him not to disclose anything to his father nor to anyone else, and simply pretend not to know him. There was no need to reply to this letter.

You Miao folded the letter closed and sighed inwardly, his emotions mixed.

Qiao Jue and Li Zhifeng both watched You Miao as he picked up his chopsticks and dug in with a heavy heart.

"Is the food no good?" Li Zhifeng asked.

"It's good." You Miao smiled when he spotted a bowl of steamed egg. Since coming to Riverwave Estate, Li Zhifeng personally made him a bowl of steamed egg every day. They didn't have much choice at the beginning in terms of food, so You Miao had fallen in love with the dish. Even now that the table was filled with fatty meats and delicious wine, Li Zhifeng still made one for him every day.

"Bring that egg to me, I love eating it," You Miao said cheerfully.

Qiao Jue passed it to him. As You Miao ate, he told the other two about the fight he had with his father at home, as well as the letters from Zhao Chao and Li Yan. Qiao Jue and Li Zhifeng listened quietly without commenting, and when You Miao was done, Li Zhifeng only nodded in acknowledgment.

When You Miao eyed him questioningly, Li Zhifeng said, "I don't get you Han folks."

Both You Miao and Qiao Jue started laughing.

Qiao Jue said, "Don't mind me saying something you won't like to hear, Miao-zi."

"Mn," You Miao responded.

“Your dad might not be anyone remarkable, but when it comes to things like this, he’s still extremely sharp. He’s unscrupulously perceptive and shrewd.”

You Miao nodded, and Qiao Jue stopped since he’d made his point.

“Come on then. Drink up, drink up.”

After the Yuanxiao feast, although You Miao was still annoyed, he was much more at ease now that he was at home. Tipsy, he went to the study to compose a response to Zhao Chao. Yet when he got down to it, he wrote and ripped up the paper, ripped and wrote; never quite coming up with the words to express what he wanted to say. In the end, he had to leave the endeavor for another day.

Regardless, Zhao Chao had told him not to respond to his letters anymore; not until after he had entered the battlefield.

That night, as You Miao hugged Li Zhifeng to sleep, he couldn’t help but sigh contentedly. “Home is still the comfiest.”

“Mn,” Li Zhifeng answered. “Earlier today, Tang Hui mentioned that there are civilians retreating from the border. They’re entering the Central Plains and migrating toward Jiangnan with their whole families.”

You Miao was almost asleep, but this jolted him awake. “What?”

Li Zhifeng sniffed the crescent of his ear like a loyal wolf, then stared deeply at him. He said after a moment, “Want to do it?”

You Miao hugged around his neck and Li Zhifeng reached out and began to unbutton his underclothes.

As he did so, You Miao kissed the corner of his lips. “What did you say just now? Say it again?”

Li Zhifeng didn’t say anything, however. He flipped over and pinned You Miao beneath him. That entire night, only the sound of harsh panting entered You Miao’s ears, and he stopped caring for anything else. Holding tightly onto Li Zhifeng, the pair tangled together, kissing and murmuring sweet nothings. The bright red lanterns outside in the night were still alight, illuminating You Miao’s baby face deep in slumber.

One early morning later, You Miao heard voices from the outside while still asleep. It seemed to be women squealing in excitement mixed with children clapping.

You Miao scratched his neck, uncomfortable, and flipped around to go back to sleep. Unfortunately, the commotion was louder than he could bear.

He sat up and yelled grumpily, "Pipe down!"

But the commotion only increased in volume, and You Miao shouted, full of fury, "*Somebody*!"

But there was not a single soul outside—even Li Zhifeng had disappeared somewhere.

Thus, You Miao had to dress himself and get out of bed. With his hair still loose, he ran out and followed where the voices were coming from. When he reached the backyard, just as he was about to scold people, he stopped in his tracks, stunned.

"There's water—!"

"Ha ha ha—!"

"Shaoye!"

"The young master is up!"

"Good morning, shaoye!"

The crowd enthusiastically greeted him, but You Miao was rooted to where he was in the garden's corridor. He stared at the pond in the back garden, tongue-tied and with eyes so wide they were almost popping out of their sockets. A stream of gurgling fresh water was flowing in and raising the water level of the pond, filling the once-dry bottom. Many of the fallen leaves were floating upward.

"How is the water coming in…*wait*!"

Something clicked in You Miao's head, and he whirled around and dashed into the backyard. All of the rockeries and ponds in the backyard were splashing with the sound of water. When he passed by the sea of bamboo, he heard the clicking of bamboo pipes knocking upon the rocks. He abruptly spun around, exclaiming in delight.

"*Ahhh*—!"

Biting cold water flowed out of the pipe he'd only just recently made with his own hands; it poured into the bamboo tube, filling it up. The weight of the water would flip the cannister, and once it was drained, it would bounce back with a click, knocking onto the rock.

There was water now! Which meant the construction of the waterwheel on the cliff was complete!

You Miao ran to the edge of the backyard and hopped on a horse, dashing off for the high plains. Along the way, he could see the tenants emerging. Water was filling the canals.

“Goddamn you all!” You Miao arrived on a dashing horse amidst the craftsmen’s laughter, and he yelled, “Why didn’t you call me?!”

Li Zhifeng stood there with an iron tenon in hand, his bare back and shoulders glistening with sweat. He looked strong and handsome under the sun. His robes were loosely tied around his waist. When he turned his head and flashed a smile at You Miao, it froze You Miao in place, his eyes lost in that expression.

“We’re trying to let it run for a bit!” Li Zhifeng shouted back. “You were still sleeping, so I didn’t call you!”

You Miao went over to him. The craftsmen down below were cheering as the blades of the waterwheel slowly rose. It was just as he imagined—the river water was lifted high over the cliff wall that was hundreds of yards tall, and was then turned over and dumped into the canal. Overjoyed, You Miao laughed boisterously; the rush of excitement was too difficult to describe with words. The entire canal was suddenly filled with fresh water that flowed downward along the hills.

“This is great!” You Miao cried, jumping up and down and hugging Li Zhifeng. Li Zhifeng only responded with a smile and a pat on his head.

Several fish were also brought up by the waterwheel’s blades, and they squirmed as they were dropped into the canal before they swam away with the water flow.

“Stop!” Old Craftsman Huang shouted from below.

A few craftsmen worked together to push the gears and the waterwheel came to a stop once more. It was obviously still being adjusted. You Miao simply sat down and refused to budge, watching the craftsmen configure the contraption.

Li Zhifeng really was outstanding; he busied himself going up and down on Old Craftsman Huang’s orders, moving gears by himself that would otherwise take the strength of five to six craftsmen combined.

That day, they hustled all the way past noon, with You Miao asking endless questions from the side and getting on Old Craftsman Huang’s nerves. Finally, by evening, Old Craftsman Huang gave an affirmative nod.

“Shaoye, why don’t you start it?” a craftsman said.

“How…how do I do that?” You Miao asked, a little nervous. People were crowded along the riverbank and over the cliff, many of whom were

from Guozhuang, and even more from Anlu. They were all gawking at You Miao's masterpiece.

Li Zhifeng placed a hand over You Miao's and said, "You ready?"

At You Miao's nod, Li Zhifeng pushed down, exerting a bit of force while holding You Miao's hands. The pair pulled out the iron spike that had kept the shaft in place.

The waterwheel emitted a large noise and began to turn. Soon after, it spun faster and faster, lifting the river water to higher ground. Cheers instantly erupted all around them, so thunderous they roared to the heavens. In that instant, You Miao wanted to both cry and laugh, and he trembled as he watched the purpling sky. In the end, he hugged Li Zhifeng around the waist and buried his face in his chest.

Together, the two watched that gigantic waterwheel spin languidly, as if it was rolling out a brand-new future.

With the waterwheel fully constructed, You Miao very generously set out a feast that very night, and anyone who came was welcome. Firecrackers were set off, good liquor was poured, and the craftsmen were treated to full cordial hospitality. Beneath the terrace, the ponds of Shen Garden were all filled with water, restoring the tranquil and elegant manor to its former glory.

If his estate—this manor and every blade of grass—had been within the limits of Yang Prefectural City, the construction would've cost at least one hundred thousand silver.

The canals were filled with fresh water, and it flowed unceasingly down the hills, pouring into the great lake behind Zhu Tang's house. Once given a few days to fill up, it would flow out of the estate and into the creek that headed toward Anlu Village.

This was truly a grand-scale construction that would bring prosperity to the land for centuries to come. From this day forward, all six thousand acres of fertile fields at Riverwave Estate would never again be troubled by droughts and floods. Guozhuang Village's chief praised You Miao nonstop for his foresight. In just a short couple of months, You Miao was able to so grandly build this barren land for which no one had cared.

You Miao paid the craftsmen their wages, and after doing a count with Qiao Jue, neither of them had much money left. Thankfully, there was barely much else that called for money from that point onward.

* * *

Spring had come, and the sun shone into the hearts of people, its rays warming their bodies. Taking his servants along, Qiao Jue personally went to Liu Prefecture to make purchases, leaving You Miao sitting at home lying in Li Zhifeng's embrace and enjoying the sun. All the flowerbeds of Shen Garden had sprouted tender green buds, and the murmuring of water and the quiet knocking of bamboo pipes carried over from the backyard.

"Let me just stay here for the rest of my life," You Miao said contentedly. "I'm not going anywhere anymore."

Li Zhifeng reminded him flatly, "Not all of the land is leased out yet. We have to wait for more people to come."

"No fear," You Miao replied lazily. "Come, butler. Let's tumble."

You Miao was hardly worried that no one would rent his land now. Once the waterwheel was built, the need to manually draw water to irrigate the land was eliminated, which meant plenty of people were going to come groveling at his feet. He could simply stay idle at home all day with nothing on his agenda except to "tumble" with Li Zhifeng, and money would come rolling in on its own. Thus, You Miao put his thoughts into action and groped around, rubbing himself against Li Zhifeng in his arms, trying to burrow all of himself into his heart. Li Zhifeng held him, and as they nuzzled, You Miao let out a grunt.

"Go inside?" Li Zhifeng suggested.

You Miao stretched. But just as he was about to move, Mu Yan came in.

"Shaoye, guests have come to call at the manor."

The perfect splendor of spring…interrupted. *How untimely*, You Miao grumbled inwardly before he got up, tied his belt, and moved himself to the main hall.

The first person who had come was someone from Sunshower Tea Estate. "The elder young master has sent me to deliver something to shaoye."

It had been days since the fight with his father. At first, You Miao didn't want to accept whatever it was and had the mind to tell the man to take it back with him. But then when You Miao thought about it, maybe there was money, so he might as well take the thing. Li Zhifeng didn't wait for You Miao's command before granting the messenger a red envelope.

There were still more people waiting to see him outside the hall. You Miao glanced at the package he'd received from the messenger. You Hange had given him a tea set with a note attached—the words crooked and scraggly—that basically implored him to cool down, to not stay fuming at Father, and other such exhortations. You Miao accepted the package without hesitation.

"Who else is out there? Have them all come in," he said.

"To answer shaoye," Cheng Guangwu spoke up from outside the door, "too many people have come; there's not enough room inside. I'll let them in one by one?"

You Miao was utterly confused.

"Let me go take a look," Li Zhifeng said.

"Let's go together," You Miao replied.

You Miao rose to his feet and headed out with Li Zhifeng in tow. When he came to the front entrance, the sight shocked him. There were *hundreds* of people. A dense, packed crowd had lined up outside the entrance of the manor—whole families, some pulling carts, some with donkeys. As soon as they saw Li Zhifeng and You Miao emerge, some immediately rushed forward to surround the pair, talking all at the same time.

"Quiet, all of you!" You Miao shouted. Then he demanded, "What's going on? You. You can explain." He pulled a man forward from the crowd. "Everyone else, don't make a peep."

"Shaoye, we came fleein' for our lives…" said the burly man. "People at Yang Prefectural City all says ya got land here to work. Please pity us and grant us a living."

You Miao was stunned.

One person out of every family present came forward and started talking. Shen Garden had become akin to a market, and You Miao had to exert a great deal of effort before he finally figured out what they were all saying. As it turned out, these people were all refugees who had fled the border and were displaced in the Central Plains with their whole families. A bunch of them had come to Jiangnan on advice from others.

"You-shaoye! You-shaoye!" A military captain came riding on horseback with a document raised in his hand, splitting the crowd as he

pushed through them. “Message from my lord—will shaoye receive this personally?!”

Li Zhifeng approached to take the document and passed it to You Miao, who opened it to read. It was an edict handwritten by Zhao Chao, and it shed light on the whole story at last. As it turned out, one hundred thousand people had fled to the Central Plains, and the outside walls of the capital were crowded with refugees who were unable to make a living. Zhao Chao saw this sight when he departed for his expedition, and remembered that You Miao had mentioned in his letters that he was having trouble recruiting tenants. Thus, with a stroke of his brush, he issued an edict and passed it to one of his men, and commanded him to lead this group of refugees southward to Jiangnan.

Yang Prefecture had been the country of fish and rice since historical times; a bountiful land—it shouldn’t be difficult to find a patch of it for these people to survive on. There was also a letter from the Governor of Yang Prefecture attached to the edict. As soon as the governor saw Zhao Chao’s handwritten edict, he’d known this was no small matter, and so he had dispatched a military officer to lead the group to Riverwave Estate. Within the letter, he told You Miao to pick and choose: keep the people that he could use, and those he didn’t want could be dismissed back to Yang Prefectural City to take on corvee labor.

You Miao stared blankly at the dense crowd outside his door, speechless for the moment. Everyone had their families with them; there were even old mothers sitting on carts and babes in swaddling clothes. This was only the first twelve households who’d spearheaded the journey, too. There were more than seven hundred heads in total. If a hundred and fifteen households were on their way, the people coming to the estate in the next few days would be endless.

“You can all stay,” You Miao said. “Cheng Guangwu, Mu Yan, and Mu Feng—the three of you will be in charge of the arrangements. Ask Li Zhifeng if you have questions. When the spring season starts, we’ll need to sow the fields immediately. I can feed everyone. No one needs to go back to Yang Prefectural City.”

The refugees erupted in cheers.

Although the refugees were happy, You Miao, on the other hand, had certainly been dealt an unlucky hand. To suddenly have so many people

pour into the estate, providing for their room and board would be a huge expense. How nice of Zhao Chao to flex his power with a move like this—sending him this many people without so much as a heads up. And worse—he didn't know a thing about it until people were already crowding his front door!

Quite a few members of the group were old, vulnerable, and disabled, but a part of the total was young and able-bodied. Some had even hauled the dead bodies of the family they'd lost on the road here on carts, the corpses covered with straw mats.

Shen Garden was completely swamped that day. You Miao immediately sent Qiao Jue's boy servant off to deliver a letter to Anlu Village and sent Cheng Guangwu to go negotiate with the Village Chief of Guozhuang Village, to see if both villages were amenable to temporary inhabitants. After all, Riverwave Estate didn't have *that* many rooms! Several women also came to Shen Garden to cook up ten large buckets of rice to feed the newcomers. For a time, the manor looked as though it was a refugee relief center.

Li Zhifeng was out making purchases all day as well. Everyone, including You Miao himself, ran around nonstop from morning to night until at last every single one of the refugees had found a place to stay.

The old, the young, the sick, and the disabled were all staying at Shen Garden, to be cared for by the families already living there. The young and the able-bodied, on the other hand, had settled in the straw huts built in Guozhuang and Anlu respectively. They were to go to the estate every day to receive farming gear and work the land. For the beginning of the spring season, You Miao would cover everyone's room and board. But once the first harvest was complete, everyone must go and build their own abodes.

"For the first year, I will collect seventy percent for rent. After this year is over, I will lower it to sixty." You Miao was sitting at the head of the main hall, speaking to the heads of the twelve new households. "I am supporting the lot of you, so everyone must be sensible. I make the call on what gets planted. Our rice crops in the south aren't like the north's. Let's grow for two seasons first, so you guys can catch your breath and feed yourselves first. Then we'll see about growing three seasons next year. How's that?"

You Miao was actually a little nervous about his speech. After all, grain couldn't be compared to tea. Fifty percent rent was already hefty, and he was asking for seventy. If the crops he selected didn't grow well and a natural disaster happened along the way, most average families wouldn't be able to survive. But for the next three months, he had taken on the burden of feeding thousands of people. *He* was the one who'd constructed the waterwheel, and *he* was the one who owned the fields. If the refugees didn't want to take the offer, then they could leave it.

At first, You Miao thought there was going to be objection. Yet unexpectedly, everyone uniformly nodded.

You Miao added, "I've got the farming tools here. Tomorrow, you can all go section off your own fields. Don't be too greedy, and don't start throwing fists if there's any disputes. Figure things out among yourselves."

The able-bodied men all gave You Miao a kowtow, and You Miao shared tea with them per Jiangnan landlord customs. Once the cup of tea was drunk, these men could each go out to find work to do; to till or plow the land. In a few days, the fields would be ready for sowing.

Once the talk was over, You Miao quickly left home and headed for the Yang Prefectural Office to acquire cereal crops. It was right at the start of the spring season, and farmers were crowding outside the Department of Procurement. But among the purchasers, You Miao was the only landlord who had personally come to acquire seeds.

The Department of Procurement was surprised to see the young master of the You family personally make an appearance. Drenched in sweat, You Miao ordered Mu Yan to weigh the crop seeds.

He crossed his hands in his sleeves and said helplessly, "Stuffing all these people into my estate without a word. I'll have to pay a personal visit to the Lord Governor to thank him one of these days."

The civil official of the Department of Procurement chuckled nervously. You Miao tugged his hand over and stuffed an ingot of broken silver in his hand. The procurement officer understood, and personally took Mu Yan to pick the finest of the seeds.

You Miao purchased six oxen from the marketplace. On the way back to Jiangbei, he and Mu Yan were like two young children as they chatted happily and drove the oxcart, rocking at a leisurely pace. After they had crossed the river, the oxcart slowed, so they had to stop for a break on the

side of the road. It was past noon when they finally returned to the manor. Li Zhifeng had returned as well, and he frowned at the sight of them.

"How come you left without a word?" Li Zhifeng questioned.

"I went to acquire cereal crops," You Miao answered. "I've no money now. No money. Have you got all the tilling tools made?"

"They're all in storage now," Li Zhifeng said.

You Miao pulled on an ox, shouting at it ceaselessly, then petted the ox's head and let it drag him along, thinking it to be super fun. Li Zhifeng watched from the sidelines. A moment later, one of the oxen behind bumped into another ox, and the two started to lock horns.

"Don't fight," Li Zhifeng chided. With an arm pushing on each side, he was able to break up the angry bulls with his arm strength alone. You Miao was left gawking, speechless.

Qiao Jue had also returned, and the moment he crossed the threshold, he was shocked to the bone.

He exclaimed, "Miao-zi! What's going on at home? It's like a bazaar!"

You Miao didn't know whether to laugh or cry; Shen Garden had only just finished renovations recently, but now it was a complete mess again. The six oxen were crammed in the front yard and the tilling tools were piled in the backyard. There was barely any space left to walk anywhere.

A group of children were playing with the water under the garden's corridor, and even though it was still the coldest time of the year, they still rolled up their pants to catch fish in the pond. The sight alone was enough to make You Miao feel cold.

"All of you, knock it off! Quiet down!" he roared.

However, the children weren't afraid of him at all, and they laughed happily as they ran off.

You Miao had exerted a great deal of effort to settle everyone, so by the time he returned to the main hall, he slumped into a puddle state. Li Zhifeng was still outside assigning work to Cheng Guangwu, and he would probably be busy for the next long while.

The lamp light inside the hall was magnificently brilliant. Qiao Jue had only just returned, but he had also been helping out around the estate nonstop; now he could finally take a breather. He came into the hall to wash his face, balance the books, and work the abacus.

"This time, we've definitely finished everything in one go. Whew."

“Yeah,” You Miao replied limply. “It’s just… So many people came all of a sudden, now there’s no place to live at all.”

“I found you a beekeeper,” Qiao Jue said. “He’ll move in come the second month. The rapeseed seeds are all in storage now, and I see you bought cereal crops. Let’s get the guys to sow the fields in ten days. The only thing I’m afraid of is the earth being too raw for the first season, not fertilized enough; it might not yield much grain.”

“As long as it can fill our stomachs, that’s enough,” You Miao said. “I’m actually not asking for much… Li Zhifeng! Li Zhifeng!”

Just as he was talking, You Miao saw two kids outside picking flowers. He was instantly outraged, and he grabbed a plank, ready to go outside to teach them a lesson.

He yelled, “I’ll beat you, you little unruly beasts!”

The kids squealed and ran off. You Miao didn’t chase them for long before he saw the kids running to hide behind Li Zhifeng. Li Zhifeng only shook his head helplessly with a grin before he turned to a few older boys.

“You start work tomorrow,” he said.

A trio of thirteen or fourteen-year-old boys were lined up in a straight row, and they nodded repeatedly. Li Zhifeng then turned around and went into the main hall with You Miao, ordering Cheng Guangwu to have dinner served as he did so.

“I hired three boys to serve Lord Uncle,” Li Zhifeng said. “With the Mu brothers and Cheng Guangwu, that’s a total of six people.”

“Heh. We’re only three people, but we need six to wait on us,” You Miao said.

Qiao Jue chuckled. “Haven’t you seen the large households that have people inside and outside; everywhere? They keep twenty to thirty servants just to serve one master.”

You Miao didn’t really care for much, but while he enjoyed a lively atmosphere, home really was a little too noisy right now. Having been worked to the bone, by nighttime, he fell asleep the moment his head hit the pillow. Qiao Jue, however, worked all the way to nearly the fourth watch—the lamplight within the sea of bamboo was alight until late.

That night, all that enveloped You Miao’s dreams were his waterwheel, the lush hills and clear waters, and the fertile fields as far as the eye could see.

The next day, more people showed up just as You Miao woke up, and they were again refugees who had come to seek a living. You Miao was tired, though.

"Just let them wait outside for now," he said.

"Let me go dismiss them," Qiao Jue said, after he finished breakfast.

Qiao Jue was a capable hand, and when he handled matters, it was with speed and order. It didn't take him more than half an hour before everyone was properly settled. The Yang Prefectural Office had meant that You Miao could pick and choose who to keep, and he could send them away if he couldn't stand the sight of them. But You Miao thought the refugees were all rather pitiful, so he kept everyone in the end—including the old, the widowed, and the orphans. At the beginning, people got to section their own land. But because randomly-drawn plots weren't easy to manage, You Miao personally drew a map of the land and sectioned the fields himself instead. Each house could temporarily farm ten to thirty acres of land.

Many days passed like this. After doing the count with Qiao Jue, it seemed that three thousand acres of land in total were leased out, which was half the fertile land on the entire estate.

And then it was time for the spring plowing. There were farmers who came to borrow the oxen, some who came to borrow the tilling tools—in a flash, everyone had scattered. They were at the peak of the splendor of spring, and Cheng Guangwu had taken a few boy servants with him to sow the rapeseed seeds in the land behind Shen Garden. You Miao watched them for a while before he turned to hop on a horse, and slowly trotted down the road.

The weather was fair on this spring day, and there were farmers tilling the land on both sides of the long estate road. The households that had arrived first had already started sowing crops. As You Miao gazed across the landscape, Riverwave Estate was like its own little village.

The water canals sprawled in all directions; crawling here and there like a cobweb that enveloped the fields. The sun was shining brightly. You Miao couldn't help but feel happy at the sight of it all.

[Chapter 19]

The second month of the year was over before anybody knew it. The weather became warmer around the third and fourth month, and every day, You Miao would patrol the estate twice. He was well and truly out of money now; the twenty silver Qiao Jue had given him had to last them an entire month more before anything was ready to be harvested.

You Miao still wanted to build a dyehouse and a silkworm room, as well as all sorts of other interesting-looking things. But the complete lack of funds forced him to put all his projects on hold for now. He passed the time flipping through books, going outside to read when the weather was nice, and taking care of the rapeseed field together with Li Zhifeng when he didn't feel like reading.

Right when spring arrived, the rapeseed flowers bloomed across the whole field as far as the eye could see. Around late spring, the beekeepers came to take up residence at the estate. The four hundred acres of land behind Shen Garden that stretched all the way downhill were all planted with rapeseed; Cheng Guangwu and everyone else in the manor tended to half of it while the tenant farmers helped take care of the other half.

In late spring, the fourth month of the year, over two hundred acres of fields were lush and green with rice sprouts.

"*Gah*, there's nothing to do at home," You Miao whined, tossing his book aside.

From where he was in the middle of stirring the coals and lighting up the stove to heat water, Li Zhifeng said, "Isn't that a good thing? You'll just complain about being tired if there *is* something to do."

One hand still holding his book, You Miao rolled his shoulders and said, "I'm bored of just sitting at home reading all day. Find me something to do."

"I have nothing to do either," Li Zhifeng replied.

You Miao couldn't stand being idle—unlike Li Zhifeng, who could just sit under the roof and stare into space for a whole day when he had nothing to do.

"Let's go horseback riding," You Miao suggested.

Li Zhifeng was, of course, happy to oblige. "Sure. You pick a place."

You Miao thought for a moment. Yang Prefectural City? Jiang Prefectural City? Actually, forget it—he knew he was gonna spend money

in the market if they went out, and there really wasn't much money left to spend. He had so many mouths to feed; the twenty silver in his possession had to last for many more months.

"Never mind, let's just stay put," You Miao mumbled, his interest snuffed. "I wonder how Zhao Chao is doing."

He hadn't heard from Zhao Chao since he'd left on that campaign to Goryeo at the start of spring. According to the refugees that came to You Miao, the situation up north was increasingly unstable every year—so much so that it was hard to make even a basic living. Soon, more refugees might be fleeing here to Jiangnan, with their whole families in tow.

You Miao couldn't fall asleep at night when he did nothing all day. He was actually quite envious of manual laborers who ate plenty and slept well. Now that summer was fast approaching, his own appetite was growing worse.

Li Zhifeng offered, "Why don't I teach you archery?"

You Miao had just been looking for something to do to move about a bit. He happily agreed and called over a bunch of the servant boys, lining them up in a row before the target board to learn how to shoot from Li Zhifeng.

Li Zhifeng's archery skills were masterful, with deadly accuracy. He could shoot from the front, the back, while running, and even on horseback—all without missing a single shot. Ever since that day, You Miao's daily routine became reading in the mornings and riding and shooting practice with Li Zhifeng in the afternoons.

Time slipped by, day by day. All the rapeseed flowers were fully grown. You Miao designed a bamboo pipe oil press for the rapeseed, and jar after jar of rapeseed oil began to pile up. Qiao Jue took them and made a round through the tri-prefectures of Yang, Liu, and Su, and returned with a net profit of three hundred and thirty-five silver. There were jars of honey stored in the cellar, as well. Discounting the small change as wages, he split the rest fifty-fifty with Qiao Jue. With one hundred and fifty silver in his coffers, he immediately felt more confident. The soil was still fertile after the rapeseed harvest, so You Miao heeded the advice of some veteran farmers and flipped the land to plant peanuts. But he still couldn't spend any of the newly-earned money—he had to build a granary first and buy

things like grindstones and sieves, not to mention feed the thousand-some people until the harvest in the eighth month.

You Miao curbed his desire to play around in order to properly study and practice martial arts. He had more or less learned some of these things back at the capital, but now he could manage to absorb more from all the reading he had been doing at the estate. It was early summer now, and the entire Jiangnan region became swelteringly hot. Luckily, Shen Garden was next to the river, and cool breezes drifted over time and again. Together with all the century-old trees in the garden, the place made for a surprisingly good hideout from the heat. Whenever it got too hot, You Miao would sit in the bamboo grove to read.

Another letter from Zhao Chao had arrived—the first in four months. The letter was only a few sentences long, briefly telling You Miao that he was on a campaign in Goryeo, and that the situation was more arduous and difficult than he had thought it would be. The letter went on to talk about how hundreds had died in this one location, how there had been an ambush in this other spot, how they had won a major victory at another place, and so on. You Miao didn't really understand what Zhao Chao was saying, so he called Li Zhifeng over to ask him about it.

"Mount Khuanmar is the boundary line between the Goryeo Kingdom and the Yuanlang Tribe," Li Zhifeng said as he drew a rough map on the paper.

"Are your people still in that region?" You Miao asked.

"When I was still in the tribe, I heard there was a branch of the tribe that often marauded near Mount Khuanmar, and that they've been growing in strength in recent years," Li Zhifeng answered.

You Miao nodded. Since Zhao Chao's expedition would inevitably encounter the Quanrong, he handed Li Zhifeng the letter. "Here, take a look."

After Li Zhifeng read the letter, he was silent for a long moment.

You Miao asked, "They'll win, right?"

Li Zhifeng didn't answer. Instead, he rose to his feet and walked to the edge of the bamboo grove. He gestured You Miao over, then used a bamboo branch to draw two mountains and a river on the ground.

"They are lying low in Mount Khuanmar. When they emerge, they will be met by a large wetland that turns into a marsh in the summer. It'll be

extremely difficult for an army to march through," Li Zhifeng explained.

You Miao leaned in from the side and studied the drawing seriously as Li Zhifeng continued.

"Zhao Chao's army is actually situated in a precarious position—he just didn't spell that out in the letter. When there's too much distance between an army's position and a provision station, it would be best if they can fight a quick battle come autumn. Otherwise, I'm afraid the entire army would be done for if this drags out to the winter."

"It's that precarious?" You Miao murmured.

Li Zhifeng tossed the branch aside and said disinterestedly, "The King of Goryeo is seventy-three this year. It'll depend on whether he takes to the battlefield himself."

You Miao lifted his head to look at Li Zhifeng. "And if he does?"

Li Zhifeng gazed back and answered seriously, "If he does, then Zhao Chao will lose. The imperial court has vastly underestimated Goryeo's military strength. Goryeo may be a small country, but forty-two years ago, their king waged war against the Wusun Tribe and won every single one of the seven battles fought, driving the Wusun out of their territory altogether. Considering the Quanrong Tribe's battle prowess, why else would the situation with the Goryeo have been at a stalemate for this long?"

You Miao nodded and mulled over how he should respond to Zhao Chao. But he knew little of the art of war, and it was impossible to conceive a battle strategy from the bits and pieces of information Zhao Chao had divulged. After racking his brains for a moment, he decided to give up and ask Li Zhifeng instead.

"What do you think Zhao Chao should do to win?" he asked.

"To win, the first thing is to not drag it out," Li Zhifeng said, washing the teacups at the side while You Miao leaned on the table watching him with his head tilted. Li Zhifeng contemplated for a long time before he continued, "The longer it drags on, the more variables will arise. And if the battlefront is spread too thin, it'll be easy for the Goryeo and Quanrong to infiltrate and ransack their provisions. Once winter arrives, some are bound to freeze to death. On top of all that, defeat will be certain if the court delays his funding."

"What would you do if you were Zhao Chao?" You Miao asked.

“If it were me, I’d ally with the Quanrong to strike at the Goryeo together. The enemy of my enemy is my friend.”

“Yeah. The Tianqi just wants the Goryeo to surrender and stop causing strife at the border anyway,” You Miao said.

Li Zhifeng didn’t comment on that remark. He said, “The leader of Quanrong’s eastern mountain branch is named Sayedo. He is very filial to his mother, and she is the only woman who travels with the Quanrong Tribe. She is also a calculating woman. If Zhao Chao can manage to make her his godmother, that might resolve your Han army’s predicament.”

“Why would he recognize someone as his godmother?” You Miao wondered.

“Quanrong customs are different from Han customs,” Li Zhifeng explained. “Since children don’t stay with their mothers, men always have their sons recognize something as their mother—some recognize the mountains and rivers as their mother, others the snow wolves. The aim is to take something that won’t so easily meet its premature end, for good luck.”

You Miao wrote down what Li Zhifeng had told him in his response to Zhao Chao, who was thousands of miles away on the battlefield.

The weather was getting hotter still, and You Miao hardly wanted to go outside except for stepping out in the evenings to inspect on the land. It was now the sixth month, and the tenant farmers had begun to tend the paddy sprouts. You Miao had gone to survey the fields once and was a little worried about the early season rice harvest, but the old farmers assured him that the soil was good and the weather for the first half of the year had been favorable for the crops, so the yield wouldn’t be bad in the least.

You Miao checked a couple ears of the rice with an air of seriousness, making use of all that he’d learned from the books. It might not be the three hundred pounds per season, nine hundred pounds a year scenario he’d initially thought, but a hundred-some pounds per acre of land shouldn’t be a problem at least. There was enough to eat, even if there wasn’t much money to be made.

At the start of the sixth month, You Miao made a trip to Yang Prefectural City and found that all the scholars there were talking about how the Prefectural Exam this year had been moved up to the sixth month. Thus, You Miao went back and sorted through his books to prepare for the upcoming exam.

The Prefectural Exam was three days long. You Miao was naturally lazy, but since coming to Riverwave Estate, he came to discover that he couldn't actually do much outside of studying. Him? Work the land? Not a chance. Back when he was pressured to study all day, all he had wanted to do instead was laze about and play around, idle and stroll the streets—basically, anything except going to school. But now that no one was pestering him, he felt restless and craved for something to do. He might as well study and take the imperial exams after all. When thinking of Zhao Chao, You Miao had always hoped to be of some use to him. Furthermore, he couldn't exactly go on as he was—sure, Shen Garden wasn't bad and Li Zhifeng's company had been fantastic, but he didn't want to just sit around at home for the rest of his life.

Thus, he had spent the past few months picking up his studies anew in preparation for the exam. Every region's Prefectural Exam this year had been moved up by two months, and no one knew the reason why—some thought it was because the Grace Exams were going to be held next year, while others speculated that it was because the border was unstable and the court was short on people. All sorts of theories were being flown, but no one really knew what was what.

Qiao Jue made a trip to Jiang Prefectural City and slipped some silver across some counters on You Miao's behalf, telling them that You Miao was already a Xiucai. The officials of course knew who You Miao was, and obliged easily enough to give him permission to take the Prefectural Exam. They also said that Sunshower Tea Estate had already sent someone over to have a *friendly talk* with the administrator of the Prefectural Exam for him. Upon this news, You Miao figured that You Hange would probably be at the exams too—but his older brother had only studied for several months; who knows if he could even read the entirety of the Three Character Classic[12] yet.

On the sixth day of the sixth month, You Miao rode into Jiang Prefectural City with Li Zhifeng. It was hot and stifling, with a rainstorm brewing in the sky above. The exam hall was packed full of people, with Xiucai from counties and villages all over Liu Prefecture gathered and chatting amongst themselves. You Miao stood by himself under the eaves, watching the dark clouds above.

“Ready?” Li Zhifeng asked.

“It’s only the Prefectural Exam. It’ll be a walk in the park for me,” You Miao replied.

Li Zhifeng laughed and reached out to pinch You Miao’s cheeks. You Miao side-eyed him and huffed.

“What’s so funny?”

Li Zhifeng shook his head and couldn’t help grinning as he said, “You’ve changed a lot in the past year.”

“Have I?” You Miao wondered absently. But thinking back, he did seem to have changed somewhat. When exactly had he started to slowly change? He mulled it over, then said offhandedly, “It’s ‘cause you’re always with me. Must be your influence.”

The You family’s horse carriage stopped outside the Prefectural Exam hall just then, and a pair of bookboys helped You Hange down. When You Hange first stepped into the hall, he inquired after something with an official. You Miao was dumbfounded at the sight of him—was he really here for the exam?! Didn’t he only just start learning his letters late last year? He couldn’t even read all the writing on the wall when he’d come to visit at New Year’s.

“Didi!” You Hange came over with a smile and a greeting. “I knew I’d see you here.”

It was Qiao Jue who had smoothed the way for You Miao to sit for the Prefectural Exam. Although Sunshower Tea Estate had put in a word for him as well, You Miao didn’t really feel like splitting hairs.

“You’re here for the exam too?” You Miao found it indescribably funny to even see You Hange at a place like this.

You Hange sheepishly replied, “My mom taught me a bit in the past, so Dad said I might as well come and try the exam just to see what it’s like.”

You Miao was truly impressed by the old man and this cheap older brother of his. He grumbled inwardly, *You’ve only got six months of learning letters under your belt. If you can qualify just like that, then what’s even the point of everyone else studying?* But then he quickly realized that that wasn’t it—the old man had nothing but money; if he threw money at the exam graders, wouldn’t You Hange easily qualify? You Miao’s face

darkened at the thought. At least You Hange himself didn't look like he was going to cheat.

You Hange told a bookboy to take out a wooden box, then he turned to You Miao. "Here, gege got this for you."

You Miao took the box and, seeing how expectant You Hange looked, couldn't bring himself to be cross with him. You Hange had been giving him stuff ever since he left home, be it money or little trinkets. He opened the box to find a Yixing tea set inside—a teapot and four cups made from purple sand.

"I didn't bring you anything…" You Miao said a little awkwardly.

Luckily, the exam hall rang the bell just then, and the students began to filter in one after another.

"Didi! Good luck!" You Hange yelled from the other side of the hall.

You Miao nodded and stepped into the exam hall. Li Zhifeng stopped just outside of it and also said, "Good luck."

You Miao grinned and walked back to Li Zhifeng, squeezing him in a hug. The exam proctor watched them and commented from the side, "Is your brother here for the exam too?"

You Miao pointed his thumb at Li Zhifeng and said, "*My* brother is the one that's waiting outside."

You Miao took out paper and a brush, and the proctor produced a bamboo tube from his sleeve, handing him the wax-sealed exam question sheet before leaving and locking the door behind him. The Prefectural Exam officially commenced.

Zhang Er was registered as a resident of Jiangnan, so his Prefectural Exam location was at the Yang Prefectural Office. You Miao and You Hange were registered in Jiangbei, so they wrote their exams at the Jiang Prefectural Office. The exam was three days in length, and every examinee was allotted one room in which they would remain for the entire duration—this included taking meals and relieving oneself. Necessities were provided within each room, and food would be delivered through a little window from the outside. You Miao's meals were always accompanied with a bowl of steamed egg; he had no clue how Li Zhifeng managed to get it to him.

The Governor of Liu Prefecture personally visited the exam hall every day during this period, and would patrol the grounds twice. He once made a

point to stop outside of You Miao's exam room and briefly questioned Li Zhifeng, but Li Zhifeng only gave succinct answers.

Three days later, the doors of the exam hall opened, and each of the Xiucai emerged looking sallow and exhausted. You Miao also looked to have lost weight.

"Let's get outta here… Home time," he grumbled. You Hange wanted to come over to say hello, but the exam hall was a rowdy mess, so You Miao waved him off. "No need to come over! We'll talk if we bump into each other later!"

Li Zhifeng grinned. "How was it? Think you passed?"

"Of course I'll pass," You Miao replied. "You should ask if I can rank top in all three levels of the exams!"

"What was on the exam?" Li Zhifeng asked.

"'The way of ultimate wisdom is the manifestation of absolute integrity,'" You Miao replied.

"Don't get it," Li Zhifeng said.

"I didn't think you would. It's from Han philosophy; the first verse of 'The Way of Ultimate Wisdom.'[13]"

The pair chitchatted idly as they returned to Riverwave Estate, and discovered that Zhang Er had gotten back ahead of them. You Miao brewed a pot of tea in the study and then proceeded to discuss the exam questions with him. After that, You Miao stopped caring about the whole ordeal, only waiting for the day the results came out.

You Miao had studied in the imperial college at the capital, and the professor who taught him back then was one of the country's great Confucian scholars who had high regard for the school of Rationalism.[14] You Miao had never really fancied the classics Zhu Xi[15] had put together, so he could never help clowning around in every class. Yet in retrospect, while he didn't agree with what the professor had taught, what he said had nevertheless been immensely practical when it came to taking exams.

"The way of ultimate wisdom is the manifestation of absolute integrity." This was how You Miao understood the verse: in order to achieve erudition, one must demonstrate moral character. This aligned with Zhu Xi's interpretation, which was "knowing before acting." Zhang Er, however, believed it to be this: in order to learn, one must self-cultivate

integrity. The two debated the meaning of the text for a long time, yet each was firm in their own reasoning.

You Miao joked, "Your explanation is right, too. If we both pass, then we'll have two Juren in the house."

Zhang Er smiled wryly. "Shaoye will definitely pass. As for me, I best stop dreaming and go help harvest the crops."

It was harvest season, and the rice stalks were drooping; heavy with grain. The second day after You Miao's return, everyone in every single tenant household of the entire estate was outside, donning straw hats to harvest rice crops under the scorching sun. The sheaves of harvested rice piled high like a small mountain. For this occasion, You Miao was adamant in going out to the fields to check out the harvest. It was his very first harvest as a landlord, and the rent he was collecting was embedded in it.

Over the next several days, You Miao wore coarse cloth shirts and mingled alongside the tenants. He spent every meal at a different house, eating whatever as he moved along. The farmers had built a straw hut beside the fields, and when they saw You Miao and Li Zhifeng coming, they all got up to greet the pair with smiles.

A single round of rice-reaping was enough to cover a person in cuts. In the heat of the hottest time of the year, he was soaking in sweat and his arms were red with scratches—his neck wasn't spared either, and was covered in bug bites. You Miao followed the farmers along and inspected two hundred acres of land, after which he was so sunburnt he lost a layer of skin. At last, every field in the estate was reaped, and the farmers began threshing. They dragged oxen and donkeys to the threshing field to compress and push the grain from the shells before sending it to be ground.

It was as if the entire estate was celebrating a festival for its very first harvest. A hydro-powered grinder was constructed next to the canal, so even the donkey was saved the work. There were farmers who went into the river to use the waterwheel to grind the grain, and others who gathered by the canal waiting to use the grinder You Miao built.

Since the moment the rice seedlings were planted, You Miao had been asking repeatedly, incessantly, *nonstop*—how many pounds could the fields yield? He had badgered everyone for three months, so much so that they all wanted to die. When at last the brown rice was weighed and every house

started to haul sack after sack of rice to the large scale in front of the manor, You Miao breathed a sigh of relief.

"Every acre produced a hundred and forty-four pounds of rice! Good going!" You Miao exclaimed. "Your house yielded the most for this year's early harvest!"

Chatter erupted from the crowd, and many stared enviously at the burly man You Miao had spoken to. The burly man sighed.

"It ain't easy, eh, shaoye. Gotta get up before the sun's risen to toil for good returns. I've got elders and young'uns at home to take care of."

"For those who produced more than a hundred and twenty pound per acre…" You Miao announced to the tenants, "…I'll charge only forty percent rent."

The cheers of the tenants exploded like thunder. You Miao had been sitting on this decision, and now that it was voiced, there were households who rejoiced and households who mourned. This was how the rich got richer and the poor got poorer.

You Miao closed the account book and said with a smile, "Don't be lazy, lighten up, there's the late harvest still. Now that all the grain has entered the granary, you all have a better idea in mind of what you can achieve. You'll be able to work toward building your own houses this way."

That night, after You Miao shut the granary door, he conducted a full count. There was a total of forty-two thousand pounds of grain harvested from three thousand two hundred and twenty-four acres of land. His rent alone was twenty thousand pounds, all collected from tenants who had paid early and delivered to You Miao's manor in full gratitude. If he sold all this rice, he could make close to four hundred silver.

This wasn't easy, huh?

But You Miao didn't want to sell the rice just yet, so the grain would stay stored for the time being.

"I'll feel better this way," You Miao said with a laugh.

"Poverty got to you, that's all," Qiao Jue said. "But people need to experience being poor sometimes. Those who've never been poor live like they're missing something in life."

In the heart of summer, amidst the cacophony of insects, You Miao and Qiao Jue sat under the big tree in the yard to stay cool. Poverty had indeed

gotten to You Miao. Recalling how back at the beginning of year, he'd been so poor he would break a coin in half to use it as two coins if he could, supporting thousands of people using only a couple hundred silver. Those were the days he never wanted to relive again.

Fortunately, the hardest part was over. The peanuts could also be harvested in a few days, and all of a sudden, Shen Garden had transformed into an oil well—a few hundred acres of peanuts could be sold for a hundred silver at the very least.

You Miao's abacus clacked away furiously. There was finally some money. He was going to save all the grain, since it wouldn't sell for much anyway. The yield from the rapeseed and the peanuts was enough to pay for a full year of Shen Garden's expenses. He thought back on how he had squandered so wastefully in the capital, silver flowing by the dozen. All the farmers across the entire estate had worked hard for a full year, and selling all of the resulting grain wouldn't be enough to support what he used to spend in a month… It filled You Miao with mixed emotions.

Li Zhifeng walked in with a letter in hand. He stopped under a lantern to read it, and the red glow illuminated the profile of his handsome face.

"Whose letter is it, let me see?" You Miao asked. "There's someone out there who'd write you letters?"

"It's yours," Li Zhifeng said.

He handed over the opened letter, so You Miao took it. If it could draw Li Zhifeng's attention, then it was probably something related to the Quanrong —which made it more than likely a letter from Zhao Chao. Of all the world, only You Miao disregarded etiquette like this; allowing his butler to open letters as he willed. When he glanced at the letter in question, sure enough, it was from Zhao Chao.

With the Third Prince on a military campaign, he was naturally accompanied by advisors. Furthermore, Nie Dan was the one leading the army. You Miao could guess that Zhao Chao wouldn't have been waiting for Li Zhifeng's analysis of the war situation from months ago, but the Quanrong customs that You Miao wrote about had nonetheless been a big help.

Zhao Chao's letter began with the current war situation. The summer had brought many consecutive thunderstorms to Mount Khuanmar, sinking Tianqi's army in mud puddles; unable to advance or retreat. The most

troublesome thing was that the food provisions were delayed. Zhao Chao's letter was choked with helplessness, and he couldn't help but lament his lack of men in the imperial court. The central government was presently drafting food supplies from every prefecture in Jiangnan in order to aid the troops north of the border, but there was no knowing when the provisions would actually arrive.

At the end of the letter, Zhao Chao wrote at length about the state exams—that the Prefectural Exam was fast approaching, and that You Miao must study hard and write it properly, so that when You Miao entered the capital in the future, he could help him keep a finger on the pulse of the court.

This letter should've arrived in Jiangnan in the fourth month, but it had been delayed on the road. This year's exam had also moved up its date. Had it not been for these trifles, Zhao Chao's letter certainly would've arrived right on time. Alas, You Miao had already taken the Prefectural Exam without his reminder. Although he had initially carried a casual, fool-around mindset, now that he was making serious considerations, he came to realize that it was true—as a man, one must certainly work hard to make something of oneself instead of staying home all day.

Days later, the results of the exam were released in Jiang Prefectural City. You Miao woke up in the morning, yawned, and sat listlessly in the main hall.

He turned to Li Zhifeng. "Why don't you go take a look at the results?"

"Mn." Li Zhifeng brought You Miao's breakfast congee over and wiped his hands.

You Miao added, "Might as well check and see if that cheap older brother of mine passed, too."

Qiao Jue was still sleeping in the back, and as the two ate, someone came to visit.

"Oh gosh, congratulations, shaoye!" A granny with a handkerchief pinched between her fingers came trotting over the moment she alighted the carriage outside Shen Garden's front entrance, exclaiming, "Congratulations, congratulations! Congratulations, Young Master Nephew!"

Outside, Cheng Guangwu had only just risen as well, and when he saw the woman run in without any shred of manners, he was instantly outraged.

"What's with all this racket? Is Shen Garden a place you can just barge in?! Get outta here!" he yelled.

The granny only urged in her high-pitched voice outside in the yard, "Young Master Nephew! Master Er sent me to congratulate you! You've gotten Juren!"

You Miao glanced out, then exchanged a look with Li Zhifeng—neither knew whether to laugh or cry. Li Zhifeng placed his chopsticks down and was just about to go out when You Miao said, "Well, that makes my life easier. You don't need to run to Jiang Prefectural City anymore."

"I'll go give her a red envelope grant,[16]" Li Zhifeng said.

You Miao grunted, preening a little on the inside. He'd passed—just as he expected. Now he'd wait to see what the old fart had to say.

Li Zhifeng had only just left when that granny started yelling outside again, "Young Master Nephew got Jieyuan! This is the first time in our Qiao Family, eh!"

You Miao toppled his bowl when he heard this, thinking he was dreaming, and exclaimed, "What? *What did you say*?!"

In the back, Qiao Jue had risen as well. The granny was indeed someone sent by Qiao Zhang to deliver news. As it turned out, the exam results had already been released the day before in Jiang Prefectural City, and Qiao Zhang just so happened to be visiting a friend there. The streets were all chattering about the You Family of Sunshower Tea Estate, and how the little young master You had gotten Jieyuan! The moment Qiao Zhang heard, he knew it to be incredible news, so he sent someone in great haste to be the first to make his congratulations while he himself returned to Yang Prefecture for a change of clothes before he rushed over.

Jieyuan was the title given to the one who took first place in the Prefectural Exam. Of the three hundred examinees who took the exam in Liu Prefecture this year, You Miao's essay was the one that had been graded with the highest marks. All of a sudden, You Miao was hit with smug elation.

Qiao Jue, on the other hand, was so shocked that he was bug-eyed and jaw-dropped. He hadn't even put on shoes—he was simply standing there

barefoot, stunned in place. It took him a minute before he burst out laughing, breaking out of his dumbfoundedness.

"We've got a Juren in the house!" he exclaimed.

Then, like a lunatic, he ran back to his quarters to grab money to reward the granny.

Good on You Miao for remaining calm as he was, but inwardly, his heart was going to beat out of his chest. He turned to the granny and asked, "What about my brother?"

The granny chuckled. "He passed too. Sunshower Tea Estate is speechless with joy. Two Juren in one family! Elder Young Master You is on the estate's side, but our Young Master Nephew is one of the Qiao Family's…"

Of course You Miao knew what the granny was implying, but the fact that You Hange also passed actually made You Miao a little upset. No doubt Father had spent money to buy that title. Hopefully his own Jieyuan title wasn't also a purchased one.

After receiving two red envelopes, the granny sat down inside the hall to have tea. Li Zhifeng was standing outside in the corridors, gazing at You Miao with a smile. But You Miao's expression was changing rapidly, looking indiscernible.

"What is it now?" Li Zhifeng asked.

"I'm just worried that this Jieyuan title was also bought by my dad," You Miao said.

"You're thinking too much," Li Zhifeng said. "If your dad has so much money, why wouldn't he buy that title for your brother first?"

You Miao gave a noncommittal "mn."

When Qiao Jue re-emerged and heard them, he said, "Do you think a Jieyuan title can be bought with money? The first-place examinees in each Prefectural Exam all need to have their names registered at the capital! Even if your dad is rolling in riches, the prefectural government wouldn't dare take his money so easily just to appoint you. If they're not careful, they'll lose their positions!"

Li Zhifeng added, "You've worked hard studying this past half year. Do you not believe in yourself?"

You Miao spun that in his head and thought, *That's true*. And so, he became happy again. He sat back down to eat more breakfast, but he wasn't

really hungry, so he started to pace back and forth inside the main hall with a wide smile on his face.

Qiao Jue hadn't gotten over his excitement yet, and he spoke up, unable to hold back. "This is great, Miao-zi. I've been waiting for the day you're able to hold your chin up. This is great, this is great…"

You Miao went over and engulfed Qiao Jue in a hug, and the two stood there in each other's embrace in silence. After a while, it was Qiao Jue whose eyes grew hot first—he seemed to have remembered You Miao's mother.

You Miao loosened his hold a moment later and went to hug Li Zhifeng. In a rare display, Li Zhifeng's lips twitched.

"All right, all right, I'll buy you candy," he cooed. Then, with a stiffened body, he dragged You Miao away.

You Miao had just had breakfast, so Li Zhifeng retrieved new clothes for him. Just as they were heading out to set off firecrackers, visitors arrived.

The first to come was the Captain of Yang Prefecture's Department of Military Defense. After Tang Hui had left a while back, a new officer by the name of Huang had replaced him. Captain Huang was thus using this occasion to get acquainted with You Miao. Following right behind was You Hange, who had come to congratulate You Miao. In You Hange's case, he had seen the exam results himself in Jiang Prefectural City the day before. He sent a boy servant home to deliver the news while he came to Riverwave Estate.

You Miao didn't know how he felt about You Hange right now. However, You Hange only hung "congratulations" on his tongue, and never spoke a word of how he had also landed a Juren title. Everyone internally knew what was going on, but no one broke the facade.

After that, it was the Village Chiefs of Guozhuang and Anlu.

Captain Huang took his leave after noon was past, and You Hange spoke up then. "Didi, Dad wants you to make a trip back home."

The fight on Yuanxiao was still fresh on You Miao's mind, so he scrunched up his face. "We'll see."

You Hange didn't push it and changed the subject. "We are now both students under the tutelage of the examiner. Now that we've gotten Juren, we'll have to go pay a visit to our teacher to greet him."

You Miao knew this was a rule; family matters aside, he still needed to know the importance and priorities of outside affairs. He replied, “I can go by myself. You…”

You Miao eyed him, knowing You Hange wanted the two of them to go together. They were brothers, after all, and visiting the examiner separately didn’t look good.

“...Just find a time to come over, and we’ll go together.”

Only then did You Hange nod. Just when he was about to take his leave, Pei County’s Magistrate showed up—to the surprise of everyone.

Now this was truly giving You Miao an incredible amount of face—this was the very first time You Miao had received a county magistrate in his own home. The Village Chiefs inside the main hall both hastily rose from their chairs to bow to the Magistrate.

The Magistrate chuckled as he entered the hall. “The Jieyuan of our Liu Prefecture has gone running over to Yang Prefecture to farm the fields; now what do I tell others?”

Laughter filled the hall, and You Miao and You Hange quickly greeted the County Magistrate with the etiquette of a junior.

You Miao joked, “Doesn’t half of this land sit in Jiangbei?”

“Well, let me ask you, Nephew You,[17]” the County Magistrate asked teasingly, “you’re still part of our Liu Prefecture, right? Even in the future?”

“But of course.”

You Miao smiled apologetically and beckoned the Magistrate to take the head seat. He then retrieved tea and brewed a pot for the guests. Everyone knew very well in their minds that the Pei County official had made a personal visit not because both You brothers had gotten Juren, but because You Miao was appointed Jieyuan. In other words, achieving a Juren status wasn’t hard, but the one appointed as Jieyuan held a bright future—a young talent that even parent officials[18] must acquaint themselves with.

The County Magistrate spoke with You Miao for a bit, most of which were reminders for You Miao to greet the examiner. After all, becoming a Juren made one a student of Liu Prefecture’s Department of Personnel—and this was a fact not to be muddled. Plus, all the Juren from the same hometown should socialize more.

You Miao could feel a headache coming on from all this exhortation. He speculated that this must be You Dechuan knowing his rebellious son wouldn't be returning to the estate, so the Pei County Magistrate was asked to give this talk on his behalf. But there was nothing You Miao could do but to listen.

Soon after, Qiao Zhang came to pay a visit too, bringing Madam Bai with him. You Miao was so overwhelmed that he was practically in tears, but had nowhere to cry; it was the first time in his life that so many guests had shown up in his home, and there weren't even enough teacups to go around.

As the day grew late, You Miao inwardly shooed his guests, *Why are you all still hanging around here? Are y'all trying to bum a free dinner from me?*

Thankfully, the Pei County Magistrate took his leave first, followed by the two Village Chiefs of Guozhuang and Anlu. Qiao Zhang, meanwhile, was dawdling around, refusing to leave. And then *another* person showed up at the door.

This time, it was Zhang Er.

You Miao quickly called out to him. "Perfect timing. Lend me a hand and butcher that goose outside. The Village Chief gave it to me. We'll eat it for dinner."

Zhang Er put down his sack, acknowledging that he'd heard from outside the door. He usually worked around Shen Garden alongside the other boy servants, so everyone saw him as a playmate.

Cheng Guangwu asked him, "Yang Prefecture's exam results are out too. How'd you do?"

"I passed as well," Zhang Er replied. "In a few days, I was hoping to ask the young master for some tea leaves as a gift for when I go greet the teacher."

You Miao was in the middle of a conversation with Qiao Zhang inside the main hall, but when he heard him, he was immediately taken aback. He ran out, exclaiming, "Zhang Er, you passed?!"

Zhang Er gave an "aye" in response while he ran around the yard chasing the goose with Mu Yan. But his nonchalant answer made the entire Shen Garden explode. Everyone came running out to the yard to congratulate him.

You Miao waved at him. “C’mere, c’mere, forget about that goose!”

Zhang Er laughed. “As long as I’m here in Shen Garden, shaoye can still think of me as a Study Companion.”

You Miao understood what he meant, and laughed. “Very well. Very thoughtful of you. Let’s eat dinner together, though, as my congratulations to you!”

The news that Riverwave Estate had given birth to two Juren shook all of Yang Prefecture. That night, You Miao and Zhang Er talked late into the night. Although Zhang Er had achieved Juren, he still appeared poor and humble, without even a courtesy name. You Miao’s courtesy name, Ziqian, was given to him by Qiao Ke-er, he just didn’t use it often. Its meaning was taken from the phrase, *“The best of virtue is like water; water benefits all, but does not compete. Such is the virtue of humility.*[19]*”* After some contemplation, You Miao gave Zhang Er a brand-new name—Zhang Wenhan, and also the courtesy name Mohuai.[20]

The next day when You Miao got out of bed, there were more visitors who came calling to congratulate him. This time, it was the County Magistrate for Yang Prefecture’s Anping County. You Miao was a registered citizen of Liu Prefecture, so even if he was appointed Jieyuan, it had nothing to do with Yang Prefecture. However, the County Magistrate came to pay a visit because Anping County had a Juren, Zhang Wenhan, living in the manor. This time, You Miao acted more mature than his age. After all, Anping County’s magistrate wasn’t close with his father You Dechuan, but was acquainted with the You Family of Yang Prefecture. Thus, when they conversed, they used familiar tones.

On the morning of the third day, uncles and cousins from the You Clan of Jiangnan came to congratulate him, and taking the chance to check out You Miao’s estate while they were there. This nonstop flow of visitors continued for ten consecutive days, and the number of guests who swarmed Shen Garden practically flattened the threshold. You Miao was so tired of dealing with them that he was ready to shut his door for good.

Things finally calmed down a bit after ten days, so You Miao slapped a note on the door that said *“The Jieyuan isn’t home!”* and simply took all the boy servants of Shen Garden out to harvest peanuts. If there were visitors…

well, Zhang Wenhan could deal with them. You Miao dusted off his arse and fled.

[Chapter 20]

Half a month had passed by the time You Hange came to visit again.

You Miao was learning how to harvest peanuts. When everyone else beside him pulled the stems, they could pull out a long string that included the roots. The way You Miao yanked, however, only snapped off the stems on the top, leaving a bunch of peanuts still buried underground. Absolutely infuriating.

You Hange came to the field in search of him, shouting, “Didi! We’ll have to go to Jiang Prefectural City in the next few days!”

It was then that You Miao finally remembered the whole thing with greeting the examiner, so he had to dust his hands off. As he shook all the dirt off of him, he shouted in the other direction, “Li Zhifeng!”

When Li Zhifeng straightened up and gazed at him from the other end of the field, You Miao shouted, “Time to go into town!”

“To buy what?” Li Zhifeng yelled back.

“Nothing!” You Miao yelled. “My bro came to find me so we can both go into town to kiss ass!”

You Hange immediately looked awkward when You Miao shouted that, but You Miao wasn’t wrong. Why else would they be going into town? The reason You Hange was calling on the manor so frequently had to be because You Dechuan was forcing him, since You Hange didn’t know how to deal with officials at all and wouldn’t know how to make himself likeable to the Commissioner of the Department of Personnel. There was no way You Dechuan would personally take You Hange to these visits, so he had to make the older son go to the younger son for no other reason than to have You Miao look after his older brother.

Li Zhifeng came over to join You Miao, who returned to the manor with the intention of changing clothes, but then he changed his mind.

“What did the old man give you to bring to the visit?” You Miao asked You Hange.

“I’ve two cases of the best Sunshower Qingfeng,” You Hange replied. “Take a look, didi.”

You Miao could tell the tea was from the tribute stock with a single glance. One case like this was worth a minimum of fifty silver. He took a case and said to the boy servant at the door, “Call Zhang Er over.”

The boy servant left to deliver the message. Even after becoming a Juren, Zhang Wenhan remained in You Miao's home. Like before, You Miao had him tidy the study and help out with errands. Zhang Wenhan seemed content with the status quo, not asking for anything more.

He entered the main hall and bowed first to You Miao. "Shaoye." Then he nodded at You Hange. "You-xiong.[21]"

You Miao gave Zhang Wenhan the case of tea. "You've got the gift for visiting the examiner now. Take it with you."

You Hange was stunned. "But—"

Ignoring him, You Miao opened the case to show the contents to Zhang Wenhan. He instructed, "The case is properly packed, so don't spill anything. The tea leaves in here are tribute-grade goods."

Zhang Wenhan nodded and took the case. You Hange asked, "Didi, what about you?"

"Li Zhifeng, go pack two sacks of the peanuts we just collected, and we'll go," You Miao said.

"..." You Hange was speechless.

However, the peanuts were one thing; a finer gift nevertheless needed to be prepared. So You Miao grabbed another two jugs of wine from his cellar, but didn't bother changing his attire.

You Hange spoke up, concerned, "Didi, you can't be going out dressed like that…"

"Well." You Miao blew him off, "You don't get it. Let's go, let's go."

You Miao was covered in dirt and Li Zhifeng was also wearing a mere brown robe, but the two simply hopped onto the horse as they were. Even if You Hange had complaints, he didn't dare to speak up. All he could do was follow You Miao down to the river to board the ferry heading for Jiang Prefectural City.

Upon arrival at the Sun Residence, You Miao and Li Zhifeng gave their name cards and a butler immediately came out to welcome them.

"Which one of you is the Jieyuan of Liu Prefecture?" asked the butler.

You Miao, still wearing a straw hat to block out the sun, stuffed a broken silver in the butler's hand. The butler immediately smiled.

"Lord Sun has been waiting a long time for you."

“There were some things at home that I couldn’t get away from,” You Miao said. “I should’ve come by to pay the teacher a visit a long time ago.”

“And this one is…?” The butler inquired.

Yan Hange immediately responded, “I also passed the exam this year. I’m You Hange from Sunshower Tea Estate.”

The butler nodded.

You Miao added, “He’s my older brother.”

The butler understood, and said, “Come with me, brothers.”

Then he led You Miao and You Hange inside. Li Zhifeng had two sacks of peanuts in his left hand and two jugs of wine in his right. When the butler brought them to the side chamber of the main hall, You Miao told Li Zhifeng to drop things off in the kitchen.

After announcing their arrival in the main hall, the butler returned to the side chamber. “The master and Lord Governor are talking. When they heard you came, they both wanted to meet you.”

You Miao nodded and followed the butler inside. He signaled You Hange with his eyes to go with him.

It was only a little past noon. Liu Prefecture’s Commissioner of the Department of Personnel, Sun Yu, and the Prefectural Governor, Hai Muyang, were having tea and conversation. You Miao had come at the best time. When he and You Hange went into the room, they first bowed to the Governor, then they kneeled and kowtowed before Sun Yu, respectfully addressing him as “Teacher.” When the two saw You Miao was covered in dirt, they found it extremely amusing.

Hai Muyang asked, “Why is Nephew You all muddy?”

You Miao gestured You Hange to take the head guest seat while he himself took the second seat. He replied with a smile, directing his answer to Sun Yu, “I just finished harvesting peanuts at the estate. I brought two sacks full of home-grown peanuts and two jugs of Champion Reds for you, sir.”

You Hange got the eye signal and very respectfully presented his case of tea. “Father has also instructed me to prepare some tea. Pray you will receive it happily, sir.”

“Very good, very good.” Sun Yu stroked his beard and nodded. He was over fifty this year. Half a month ago, he was indeed the Chief Examination

Officer who had patrolled the Prefecture Exams, while Hai Muyang was the one who routinely made a couple rounds every day at the exam hall.

"Your father was famous throughout Liu, Yang, and Su Prefectures back in the day," Hai Muyang said with a smile. "And now he's attained such massive estates to support you two in serious studies. Now that you have both achieved a title, you can say one of his wishes is now fulfilled."

You Miao nodded repeatedly, knowing full well that what this governor meant by "famous" might not have been a compliment. After all, his old dad had messed around so much that men of books were inured to his antics.

Sun Yu didn't mention the Prefectural Exam. Instead, the group only exchanged brief pleasantries.

You Miao said, "Before I was born, my mom bought me a manor. It's not a big place, but it's tranquil and right next to the river. If Mister Sun and Lord Hai don't mind visiting Shen Garden, then when autumn comes, I will eagerly await your arrival."

"I've heard," Sun Yu said. "Lu Yu the Wanton's[22] garden. It's a nice place, but make sure you don't end up coveting for pleasures all day."

"Of course not." You Miao sniffed in amusement. "I only hope the capital will have the Grace Exams soon, so we can take the Metropolitan Exam and serve the country."

"Your family has such a large fortune that there is enough to feed your posterity for several generations, even if you don't study," Sun Yu said.

You Hange quickly replied, "Dad always lectures me that we must survive on our own means, and not just cling to the ancestors' lands to while away our days."

"Very good, that's the spirit," Governor Hai said. "You Miao, I've read your essay. It's very well written…"

Sun Yu and Hai Muyang exchanged a look, the two seeming to share a tacit understanding. You Miao couldn't read them, so he only nodded obediently and answered with humble declinations.

Governor Hai continued, "I was under the impression that you did not know of the common people's livelihood at first. But now that I've met you today, it seems you enjoy getting your hands dirty and doing things yourself. This attitude is commendable."

“Don’t praise him too much, now,” Sun Yu chided.

Governor Hai chuckled. “I’m simply here to check out your students. I’ll take my leave now.”

Governor Hai rose to his feet to bid farewell, and the brothers quickly got up as well to send him off, following after Sun Yu to see him out the door. When Sun Yu returned to the main hall again, the expression on his face was unreadable, and he didn’t speak for a long time.

“How much does one peck of rice cost this year?” Sun Yu languidly asked after a while.

You Miao hadn’t expected this question, and You Hange was even more perplexed. A moment later, You Hange honestly answered, “I am ashamed to say I do not know.”

Although You Hange had followed his mother to make a living for many years, he had never managed the family finances. All of the purchases for rice and oil had been done by Madam Wang herself. You Hange had only handled petty cash while conducting their small businesses, and so he was ignorant of everything else.

You Miao mentally calculated for a moment. One peck of rice was twelve pounds, and one pound was eight coins. He answered, “One peck of rice is approximately ninety-six coins. The harvest wholesale price this year is ninety coins, and the market price is one hundred coins.”

Sun Yu nodded slowly. You Miao was quiet for a moment, then he spoke up and offered, “Will you allow me to brew a pot of tea for you, sir?”

“Go wash your hands in the water basin down the hall first,” Sun Yu commanded.

You Miao left with a smile to do as he was told. After he was gone, Sun Yu turned to You Hange.

“Your essay is not as good as your little brother’s. You need to work hard and study diligently for many more years. ‘Ten years by the freezing window’—painstaking studying—is not an experience that can be bought with money.”

Sun Yu did not hold back with his words, and You Hange could do naught but nod, sweat forming on his forehead. How could his exam scroll be considered an essay? It was clearly You Dechuan’s money that got him here!

Sun Yu continued, “If you are only seeking a plentiful life in Liu Prefecture and to have tenants everywhere respectfully address you as ‘Master Juren,’ then coming this far is enough. If you want to try for a greater title, then you will need to study for at least another ten years.”

“Yes, sir.” You Hange nodded. “You are right, sir.”

Sun Yu added, “Your father, on the other hand, is certainly very learned, and often socializes with the scholars of Liu Prefecture. If you have the time, go meet with them. Familiarize yourself with them. The Lin Family of Pei County also has a new Juren. He’s the nephew of Pei County’s Magistrate. You can befriend him and others alike.”

“Your instructions will be heeded, sir,” You Hange said.

You Miao came back to the room after washing his hands and matter-of-factly took the seat right next to Sun Yu. He rolled up his sleeves to start brewing the tea.

Sun Yu gave him a look. “And you. You’re endowed with intelligence.”

You Miao was excellent at reading people, and in a few short sentences, he could tell Sun Yu favored him. But there were different types of favor, and different ways of responding to them.

You Miao chuckled softly, trying to think of something to say. In the end, he only said, “I am not worthy of such praise.”

The corners of Sun Yu’s bearded lips twitched. You Miao poured the tea, signaling with his eyes at the same time. You Hange got the message and immediately stood to respectfully offer the teacup to Sun Yu. Sun Yu casually took the tea without sparing You Hange a single glance, and put the cup down after having taken a sip. He gave You Miao a look, appearing extremely amused.

“Your father’s trying very hard,” he commented.

You Hange wasn’t accustomed to word games with people in officialdom, so Sun Yu’s comment had him completely in the fog. You Miao, however, understood perfectly. As soon as Sun Yu saw him squint his eyes at You Hange, he knew that this had all been planned by You Dechuan.

A Jieyuan coming to pay his respects had brought along a brother who’d bought his Juren title. Sun Yu would rarely ever run into something this hilarious in his life. You Miao only responded with a helpless smile and didn’t say a word.

“You’re smart.” Sun Yu placed the empty cup by the corner of the table and tapped his fingers a couple times, his gaze moving to the outside yard. “But impetuous in character. You will need to temper yourself in order to achieve great things. What are your plans in the near future?”

You Miao thought for a moment before he answered, “Nothing in particular. Live at the estate for the time being and study behind closed doors, then we’ll see in a few years.”

Sun Yu nodded. “And after that? Do you plan on staying at the estate for the rest of your life?”

After a moment of contemplation, You Miao responded with respect, “I want to ‘cultivate self-discipline, bring order to the family, govern the state, and conquer the world.’[23]”

“And how does one ‘govern the state and conquer the world’?” Sun Yu questioned.

You Miao knew that Sun Yu had begun testing him, and that he could absolutely not give a wrong answer at a time like this. He spent a long time mulling over the question. Sun Yu didn’t rush him, and simply sat there drinking his tea in leisure.

The silence lasted for a long time before You Miao finally spoke. “The foundation of world governance is people; to govern the world is to govern the people. Those who win the hearts of the people will have the world.”

Sun Yu neither approved nor refuted this statement. A long while after, he nodded. Then he turned to You Hange. “And what about you?”

You Hange replied reverently, “Be filial to my parents, and care for my little brother. I know myself to be dull-witted, so I dare not have other fantasies. Father is also making me study in order to widen my perspective and properly manage the family business.”

“You’ve reached the stage of bringing order to the family, and stopped there.” Sun Yu’s beard twitched. He added a moment later, “But what you said is correct as well. Filial piety is the most important of all virtues; there is also the adage, ‘If one cannot sweep one’s house, one cannot sweep the world.’ It is already rare that you possess such thinking.”

You Miao felt nervous, wondering if his answer was perhaps too grand. He studied Sun Yu’s expression. However, after Sun Yu finished the pot of tea, he said to You Miao, “I won’t keep you both.”

You Miao knew this meant the visit was over, and he quickly rose from his chair with You Hange to bid farewell.

Sun Yu added, “If you have questions about your studies, or there are subjects that confuse you, by all means, come over and ask. But you can leave the tea next time. You Miao, you can come often.”

You Miao inwardly sighed a breath of relief. The two brothers quickly bowed to show their gratitude before taking their leave.

As they exited the door, You Hange said, “I’ll have to go home to report to Father. Why don’t you come back with me?”

“No,” You Miao refused. Then with a serious face, he said, “Don’t hurry off; I’ve something to tell you, and then I’ll have done my duty to the old man.”

The two stopped outside on the street, and You Miao explained, “What Mister Sun meant is that we can pay frequent visits if we have any questions.”

You Hange nodded. “Yes, of course I’ll come often.”

You Miao didn’t know whether to laugh or cry, and further explained, “You didn’t get it. He wants you to study first. There’s no need to run to him over petty sundries, like if you don’t recognize a character or something. Only visit in order to request guidance on questions that average teachers can’t answer. Be honest and don’t be afraid to show your hand. He already knows perfectly well what our cards look like after seeing our essays, anyway.”

You Hange nodded to indicate he understood.

You Miao was going to explain a bit more, but then he changed his mind. He thought, *Whatever, it’s not like You Hange’s end goal is to become an official anyway*. You Dechuan didn’t have plans for him to become an official, and had only paid for the Juren title. The estate would have more of a reputation if the eldest son possessed some sort of status, that was all.

And so, You Miao said instead, “Go back and ask the old man if you have questions. Just follow along with whatever he has in store for you.”

“What about you?” You Hange asked. “Let’s go back to the estate together?”

“Nah,” You Miao replied. “I’m gonna spend a night here in Jiang Prefectural City. You go back.”

Once You Hange left, it was just You Miao and Li Zhifeng.

Li Zhifeng asked, “Are we going back to the estate?”

“Our conversation wasn’t done,” You Miao said. “I’ll have to come again tomorrow to keep kissing ass. Come, let’s go stroll around the markets and shop.”

Li Zhifeng had the horse’s reins in hand, and the two did a circuit through the markets, making a few small purchases of food and useful trinkets and filling an entire cart full of spoils.

The next day, You Miao got out of bed right at the crack of dawn and went to stand outside the Sun Residence. The butler was bewildered at first by the sight of him, but understanding quickly dawned on him and he smiled.

“Wait inside. The master hasn’t risen yet.”

Thus, You Miao re-entered the side chamber of the main hall and indulged in tea by himself, picking up *“The Book of Songs”* that was tossed to the side and flipping through it. Li Zhifeng stood by his side and waited on him, and You Miao gestured for him to join in tea drinking.

It wasn’t until early morning that Sun Yu rose. As two maids brushed his beard, he learned that You Miao had been waiting for him since dawn. He nodded, pleased, and instructed the butler to serve You Miao breakfast. It was after the morning meal was done that the senior and junior at last sat together in the main hall, and only today did You Miao begin to discuss his essay and request guidance.

Sun Yu was a scholar born of Liu Prefecture. He had once held a ten-year tenure as a court official. Later, he was transferred back to Liu Prefecture to become the Commissioner of the Department of Personnel, a post that lasted fifteen years. A Jinshi of the Third Year of Qingshuo, he was friends with many great Confucian scholars of the imperial capital. At the Prefectural Exam this year, the moment he cast his eyes on You Miao’s scroll, it had been as if he'd met his old friends. Sun Yu also liked You Miao’s literary character and mind, and so he had personally given him the Jieyuan title.

However, based on the knowledge You Miao had accumulated, it was obvious he still needed to study for many more years. The pair conversed for an entire day, and at the end of the session, You Miao felt he had benefited greatly. He knew he couldn’t screw around anymore like he used to a year ago back at the capital.

The way of officialdom, the way of learning, and serving the country and the people… As a man, these were things that should constantly occupy his mind.

* * *

You Miao was deeply concerned about Zhao Chao's situation, and so when his conversation with Sun Yu broached the subject of the war with Goryeo, he couldn't help but say a bit more on the matter and consult Sun Yu on the issue of the border. They'd only just picked up the topic when both surprised each other. Sun Yu was surprised that You Miao knew the current happenings with the army at the border like the back of his hand, and what surprised You Miao was that Sun Yu knew how to fight! Warcraft, military strategy… Sun Yu was clear and logical in his analysis of it all.

"Thirty years ago, at the height of Tianqi's prosperity," Sun Yu sighed in spite of himself, "Civil servants could hop onto a horse with bows and arrows to kill enemies, and compose memorials to the throne with a simple sweep of their brushes. But look at things now. How many young people can do the same? Can *you*? The imperial court of today is full of rotten scholars who are weak in both mind and body. They only know how to compose in officialese; when it came to military strategies, they know nothing. Otherwise, we wouldn't have suffered such an utter defeat at the hands of the Barbarians ten years ago."

"I do want to learn, it's just…" You Miao sighed heavily.

Sun Yu replied languidly, "Of course I know you want to learn. You wouldn't have come today to visit again otherwise."

Despite the compliment, You Miao's heart was still somewhat heavy, and worry lined his brow. Sun Yu could see it all on You Miao's face.

"You want to learn the art of war and stratagem, but it is not something to be rushed," Sun Yu added. "What is victory? What is defeat? What are soldiers? Don't underestimate the power of a civil official. A truly capable official can replace a million fierce soldiers at the imperial court. Do you believe me?"

A vague understanding seemed to dawn on You Miao.

"'The highest form of generalship is dissembling the enemy's plans. The second-highest form is deterring the assemblage of enemy forces; the

third-highest is attacking the enemy's forces on the field. The lowest form of all is besieging walled cities.'[24]"

You Miao was immediately enlightened, understanding what Sun Yu was trying to say—this old civil official was indeed an outstanding scholar.

Sun Yu continued, "The supreme art of war—"

"Is to subdue enemies without fighting!" You Miao finished.

"That's it exactly," Sun Yu said. "If the court can accurately assess the situation from thousands of miles away, then many battles won't need to be fought. Back then at the capital, I presented to His Majesty a plan to sow discord between our enemies. If the Goryeo royals turned on each other, would we have seen Goryeo grow to its current strength and glory now, and find ourselves mired in such trouble?"

"Sir, you… You held a post in the imperial court?" You Miao asked.

Sun Yu gave a brief, indifferent smile. "Your teacher was actually banished from the capital, and sent here to Liu Prefecture!"

You Miao got it now. It seemed Sun Yu had been a highly ranked official back in the day. But he didn't dare ask more, so he only responded with a sigh and furrowed brows.

"His Highness the Third Prince is off on an expedition. I only hope he'll return soon in victory," You Miao said.

"We all wish the same." Sun Yu sighed heavily. "But the current Chancellor made one wrong move: the provisions can't keep up with his decision to pull the defense troops from the Yanbian border and embark on a long campaign to Goryeo. It really is—"

"Exhausting the people and draining the treasury?" You Miao finished for him.

Sun Yu frowned slightly and You Miao quickly shut his mouth.

Sun Yu then continued, "In a little while, the imperial government will most likely issue a decree for the expropriation of grain from Jiangnan to aid military rations. Never mind. Time for you to head back, it's getting late."

As You Miao rose from his chair to take his leave, he inquired, "May I borrow a few books to read, sir?"

"Take what you like," Sun Yu said.

You Miao went to the library and borrowed books before he respectfully took his leave. Once he got home, he thought back on the session and realized he did indeed learn a lot from Sun Yu. He thus dug into the books seriously and paid another visit. Sun Yu tested him on his studies but then scolded him harshly, reproaching him for being flighty and unsettled, and told him to go home and re-read the books again.

"How does one read?" Sun Yu questioned. "When you read, do you only stop at knowing the text? Do you not have a single thought of your own?"

Sweat covered You Miao's forehead as he listened to the admonition. At first, he had only wanted to butter Sun Yu up and play cute, showing that he had finished reading all the books in order to please Sun Yu and maybe learn a thing or two. Yet Sun Yu was quick to see right through You Miao's little scheme.

"Let me ask you a question," Sun Yu said. "'The Path is not distanced from man, for if the practice of The Path is distanced from man, such cannot be considered The Path.'[25] How do you interpret this?"

"..." You Miao was quiet.

Sun Yu sat down with the book in hand. "Answer freely, I will not punish you with the plank."

You Miao didn't know whether to laugh or cry, and pondered for a moment before he said, "I believe the verse is saying: The Path is not separate from man. If man tries to pursue the practice of The Path apart from man, that which is practiced cannot be considered The Path."

Sun Yu grunted, and You Miao further elaborated after a pause, "That is to say, The Path cannot be practiced in seclusion, forsaking society, but is…"

You Miao trailed off, not knowing how to complete his thought. Before, he was sure he understood the text. But now that the words were coming out of his mouth, he abruptly realized he couldn't express himself.

"Ho ho." Sun Yu watched You Miao and chuckled drily without mirth.

You Miao was dumbstruck. He pondered for another moment before he tried again. "This is the principle…and in order to act on this principle, we must begin with the people…carry out the action…within a crowd? The moment we stray into seclusion, we… I don't get it."

With a stormy expression, Sun Yu whipped the book out to You Miao, holding it high in the air and very nearly slapping You Miao's face with it.

After You Miao finished his sentence, even he felt his answer was bullshit that made no sense. He scrunched up his face, looking as if he couldn't bear to witness the mess either, and trembled in nervousness as he approached to take the book.

"Let me ask you another question." Sun Yu held out the book, but didn't give it to him. He questioned in a grave voice, "What is The Path?"

"The Path... It's… The path, the path, the path…" You Miao knew the test question came from *"The Doctrine of the Mean,"* so naturally, the answer had to do with *"The Path of the Golden Mean."* But what *was* the Golden Mean? And the fact was, the entire book was about the Golden Mean. Yet again, You Miao didn't know what to say.

"'The Path that which can be spoken of is not the Universal Path'[26]," Sun Yu recited, enunciating unhurriedly.

"Right. That's right. Exactly," You Miao said. "The Path can't be spoken of."

"Go home and reflect on it properly! All this half-baked knowledge! Perilous!"

What immediately followed was the hurled book hitting You Miao squarely in the face.

And so, You Miao could only pick up the book and go home. Sitting in his study, he took out a sheet of paper and, going by the book, transcribed a few lines. Then he annotated it based on his own comprehension. He thought he had understood all the text he had read in the past. Yet now when he tried to read between the lines, there were surprisingly many places where he didn't get it. He could grasp the basic meanings when he read, but if he were to be forced to discuss the concepts in writing, he found himself scratching his head, not knowing where to begin. In the end, he asked Zhang Wenhan for help.

As for Zhang Wenhan, he thought he had understood the text too. But when faced with the blank sheet of paper, he abruptly discovered that he shared the same problem. They debated the topic for half a day, then Zhang Wenhan took the books to go consult his teacher in Yang Prefecture. When he returned, he filled You Miao in on what was taught. The two spent a full

ten days before they were able to finish annotating the one book. Hugging a pile of papers, You Miao went to visit Sun Yu again.

Sun Yu was having tea and didn't spare a look at whatever You Miao had written. "There is a case on top of the shelf in the library. Bring it over," he said.

You Miao did as he was told. When he opened the case, he discovered that it was full of annotations from the grand Confucian scholars of the previous reign. It was as though he had found treasure, and immediately, he began to compare his notes to them. Nevertheless, there were still many places where didn't understand, so he asked questions as he read. Sun Yu tossed him a book in response. It was his own annotations, still fresh with ink—they were obviously notes on his textual comprehension from the past ten days.

You Miao's jaw dropped, speechless. But then he couldn't help but smile.

"Why are you smiling?" Sun Yu questioned.

You Miao's smile widened into a grin. "I get it, so I smile."

Sun Yu grunted. "Enlightened?"

You Miao gave an earnest nod. "A little."

"'If a man can learn of the right Path in the morning, he may die by sunset without regrets,'[27]" Sun Yu recited. "To realize the truth, to comprehend The Path, is thus The Path."

"Right, right," You Miao agreed.

"Now try telling me again: what is The Path?" Sun Yu questioned.

The pair of senior and junior stared at each other in silence. A moment later, You Miao said, "This student…is shallow. I still do not know what to say."

Sun Yu smiled in satisfaction. "The boy is worth teaching. This old man doesn't know what to say either."

You Miao burst out laughing, indescribably happy.

Sun Yu continued, "What your teacher has written might not be correct, either. Now look at yourself. Do you see how laughable it is that you thought you could read a book in three days' time?"

"Yes, sir. This student was too arrogant and overestimated his own abilities," You Miao said.

“‘A good memory cannot a ruined brush compare’—hard work is worth more than talent. From now on, write more and speak less, and words will flow naturally from your proficiency. When you read a book, you must recognize that the book does not belong to you. The day it does belong to you is the day you can teach others how to read it.”

You Miao was in complete and utter awe. Since then, he no longer dared to parade his own supposed cleverness. Instead, he began to properly follow Sun Yu’s teachings, and learned how to learn from scratch.

Sometimes when Sun Yu got into it during his instructions, he would chuck books and curse that the sages spoke nothing but bullshit; sometimes when he read to the point of forgetting himself, he would burst out laughing at random. Yet now that You Miao was diligently making frequent visits, he discovered that although Sun Yu was banished to Liu Prefecture, endless streams of guests still came to knock on his door. Many of these people seemed to hope that Sun Yu would rise to power again one day and return to the capital.

Sometimes when guests came, Sun Yu would have You Miao stand by the side to listen in. When it came to the subject of the current state of the government and the world, You Miao discovered that even when Sun Yu never set foot out of the house, he knew all the happenings. After the guests left, Sun Yu would repeat the conversation again and discuss and analyze it in detail for You Miao’s benefit.

Sometimes when Sun Yu became frustrated with a book, he would take a break and play chess with You Miao. When it came to the art of tea, You Miao’s skills were second to none in all of Jiangnan. However, when it came to the art of chess, he was a nobody. His lousy skills often gave Sun Yu—the old fart—a good laugh. Young and full of youthful pride, You Miao would want to go again every time he lost, and he could never stop himself from dragging Sun Yu into round after round—but his opponent was his teacher, so all that landed him were rounds of scolding. Slowly, when guests came to challenge Sun Yu in chess, You Miao would crane his neck and peek at their plays while he served drinks. As time went on, he managed to learn tidbits from Sun Yu’s skills—though he still suffered utter defeat every time. You Miao would later learn, albeit unintentionally from the mouth of the Governor, that Sun Yu was actually a national champion. No wonder!

The summer came to a close after many a thunderstorm. You Miao picked up his brush to write a letter to Zhao Chao, letting him know that he had gotten first place in the Prefectural Exam, and also included Sun Yu's analyses of the current war situation.

He usually spent his days taking care of his fields and learning archery with Li Zhifeng, drinking tea and reading. Aside from that, he routinely visited Sun Yu to study. Sun Yu didn't care for Mohist mechanical engineering a single bit and called it "nothing but petty tricks." Snubbed and scolded, You Miao had to settle down and behave and obediently study in front of his teacher.

The late season crops of autumn were harvested. Compared to the first spring season, the yield had doubled. There had been sufficient fertilizer, the earth was tilled deep, and the sun had been favorable in the second half of the year, so before winter arrived, a full forty-five thousand pounds of grain were harvested! Qiao Jue did the books for You Miao, and he discovered that there was now over a thousand silver in the account.

With all this money, You Miao wanted to splurge, but couldn't bear to do so. When he went to Qiao Jue to review his finances, Qiao Jue proposed an idea.

"Miao-zi, I've got a plan, actually. Why don't we open a rice shop in Yang Prefectural City?"

"Do we have that much rice to sell?" You Miao wondered.

"Real estate in Yang Prefecture is easy to acquire at the moment," Qiao Jue said. "For about eight hundred silver, we can set up four street-facing storefronts, buy two houses…"

"..." You Miao stared speechlessly at Qiao Jue for a moment before he wailed, "Eight hundred silver! That's robbery! *No*! I worked my butt off for a year and only made a thousand!"

"But this is a matter of money growing money," Qiao Jue explained. "Once you've got the business set up, in the future, you can open a rice shop, an oil shop, a honey shop…or even a tea shop. Everything's been thought of."

You Miao turned over the idea in his head and realized Qiao Jue was right. If he sold to a tea or grain retailer, he would at most only make a percentage of the total profit. It would be infinitely better if he sold the

stock himself. When he went home that night, he pulled Li Zhifeng aside to discuss the idea further, but Li Zhifeng only stared at him.

"It's your money," Li Zhifeng said. "Your call."

"Oh, come on, aren't we in this together? What do you think?" You Miao pressed.

"Then open up shop," Li Zhifeng replied. "Qiao Jue is an intelligent man. It won't be a loss to trust him."

You Miao didn't know whether to laugh or cry at his response—everyone else made decisions based on the issue at hand, but Li Zhifeng based his decisions on the person in question. As long as he approved of the person, they could do no wrong. However, when You Miao thought about it, the reasoning had its merits. In the end, he granted Qiao Jue permission and gave him two hundred silver.

[Chapter 21]

Winter passed and spring came. This year, You Miao was dead set on *not* going back to Sunshower Tea Estate, come hell or high water—such being the case, he simply cut ties directly. When the spring season began, he recruited another hundred or so tenant farmers from Su Prefecture, and managed to lease out eighty percent of Riverwave Estate's fertile land.

This second year, You Miao attempted to grow three seasons of crops. Alas, the heavens do not heed the wishes of man—the Jiangnan region was not warm enough, so he had to go back to growing only two seasons. The tea trees didn't produce good leaves in their first year, but the picking was still a necessary task, so Qiao Jue hired over twenty tea-picking girls to come to Jiangbei. The highest grade of tea was not so easily picked, as the leaves needed to be gently plucked from branch tips with the soft lips of a maiden. The leaves would then go through an extensive process of being sieved, stirred, fermented, and roasted. After all the hassle of the first year, only nine pounds of tea were produced.

You Miao was caught between laughter and tears as he stared at the nine pounds of tea, but Qiao Jue only chuckled.

"Not bad for the first harvest. None of the tea trees are fully grown, so this is enough," he said.

"What can we even do with this bit of tea?!" You Miao cried.

Qiao Jue said, "Our tea is a tael of leaves for a tael of silver—do the calculations yourself. That's at least a hundred and fifty silver. Stuff like tea is all about quality, not quantity. The less there is, the greater its value. Let those rich nobles and officials have a taste, make them think all other teas are bland after drinking ours, then we're good."

You Miao tried a sip of the oolong tea. It certainly was fragrant, and the body was rich with a hint of astringency, ending with a sweet aftertaste. The hint of astringency was probably due to the fact that the leaves had only just entered storage, and hadn't aged enough to lose the light bitterness. Give it another few months, and the flavor should be properly mellow.

Another year passed. In the Thirty-Fifth Year of Qingshuo, You Miao spent a sum of money to build two suspension bridges to connect Riverwave Estate to the north and south shores respectively. By the time the rice was harvested in the spring and autumn seasons, there were hundreds

of bushels of grain in You Miao's storage, and You Miao had become a truly filthy-rich little landlord.

Naturally, on the first and fifteenth of every month, there was the obligatory visit to seek education from Sun Yu. As the days went by, You Miao slowly came to realize over time that Sun Yu was not a simple character. He was adept in both the brush and the sword, and thoroughly versed in the Four Books and Five Classics—though his temperament was also eccentric and unpredictable. Sometimes when You Miao slacked off and didn't study for a week, Sun Yu would punish him by having him kneel in the courtyard for up to six hours, which was from lunch to sundown.

Under Sun Yu's instruction, You Miao consumed an enormous number of books that comprised of not only Confucian philosophy, but also history and the classics and associated dissertations. When faced with the vast sea that was the Sun Family's book collection, You Miao had to heave a heavy sigh—he would probably never get through them all in this lifetime. However, compared to his time in the capital, he was learning each book he read much more thoroughly.

In the past two years, Zhao Chao had only sent him five letters, each of which discussed the warfront. It was obvious how hard it was for the army to march in the blowing snow. Finally, in the spring of the Thirty-Sixth Year of Qingshuo, the imperial court received news of its first devastating defeat.

Right at the start of winter the year before, the Barbarians began to increase the frequency of their encroachments on the northern border. The Tianqi Emperor had no choice but to pull Nie Dan out from the Goryeo campaign to have him defend Hebei, the capital region. A hundred thousand of Zhao Chao's men were taken as a result. They were subsequently replaced—except it was with new recruits.

Come spring, the Goryeo King personally joined the warfront, and Tianqi's two hundred thousand soldiers fell into a stalemate with Goryeo's army of one hundred thousand. There was an urgent need for rations, so the imperial court ordered grain to be levied from Jiangnan's four prefectures—Liu, Su, Jiao, and Yang—in order to aid the frontlines. However, this made things difficult for the four governors. Meeting the central government's demands would basically force them to make the local landlords sell their grain below market price. But they had no choice, so expropriation was decreed and all the major clans of the Jiangnan region were notified.

Sun Yu didn't speak for a long time after he finished reading the letter, and then he heaved a long sigh.

"Sir, there's no one in Jiangnan willing to release grain right now. What should be done?" You Miao asked.

Sun Yu gave You Miao a long, meaningful stare. He questioned him a moment later, "Will you spearhead the food drive?"

"What do you mean by 'spearhead'? My friend is fighting at the frontlines. Isn't war the business of the entire country?" You Miao asked.

"If you intend on pursuing a career in officialdom, then you should know you cannot stand with the Third Prince's faction," Sun Yu said. "And if His Majesty cared even a little for this son, then he would never have thought to send him to the frontlines."

"But what they're fighting for is our homeland! Sir!" You Miao cried.

You Miao was no longer the same person he was two years ago. He had learned much more about contemporary politics and affairs of the current court. And through Sun Yu's instruction, he was now able to see things much clearer—he knew the entire imperial court was eager for Zhao Chao to lose.

As soon as Zhao Chao lost and returned to the capital, the court could proceed to negotiate peace with Goryeo. But as a result, the Third Prince would never see the light of the sun ever again. If the Emperor had really intended to test Zhao Chao's abilities and have him make a name for himself, then under the current circumstances, Zhao Chao would have no choice but to return defeated, with his tail between his legs, and behave. He would never again qualify to contend with the Crown Prince.

"From your standpoint, what should be done? From the nation's standpoint, what should be done?" Sun Yu asked. "You should know, after receiving two years of education from me."

You Miao nodded in silence. He understood. But he also knew that at the bottom of Sun Yu's heart, he also supported donating food supplies. A man should put his country first, and himself second. Sun Yu had been a tough one back then, which was why he had lost his position as a court official and was banished to Liu Prefecture as a powerless commissioner.

That day, when You Miao got home, he donated a hundred thousand pounds worth of grain. As soon as word of his actions got out, the major houses of Liu Prefecture fell into a heated debate. Some followed You

Miao's example and donated, while some only watched and observed from the sidelines without a word. In the end, albeit arduously, the four prefectures were able to gather five hundred thousand pounds of food provisions to be sent to the capital.

Yet there were no new developments at Zhao Chao's warfront. When You Miao responded to his letter, he didn't mention the expropriation of grain and only discussed Sun Yu's analysis of the war. Another year passed, and when spring came once more, the news Sun Yu received from the imperial envoy was that Zhao Chao had lost.

Zhao Chao was completely and utterly defeated. There hadn't been enough food and the soldiers had mutinied. On top of that, there had been a sudden ambush by the Goryeo King. Nearly half of the two hundred thousand soldiers were lost, and the broken army had fled back behind the checkpoints at the northeastern border. Chancellor Li was getting on in age, so his son Li Yan had traveled beyond the border on behalf of his father to negotiate peace. One hundred thousand silver was to be paid, one thousand bolts of silk to be yielded, and all four cities of Guandong were to be surrendered to the Goryeo King.

You Miao was inside Sun Yu's main hall when he heard the news, and instantly, he started to shake uncontrollably as if his body had gone numb. Anguish, fury, hate, and a myriad of other emotions surged into his heart, crashing like waves against his chest without an outlet. He desperately wanted to scream and shout, but had to force himself to suppress the urge—only the rims of his eyes were red and his lips quivered nonstop.

Sun Yu heaved a long sigh. "A tragedy for the country."

The imperial envoy sighed as well with mixed emotions. "It was inevitable. There were many who tried to talk His Highness out of joining the campaign on the day of his departure. But alas, the youth are proud. They don't listen…"

You Miao was standing behind Sun Yu, his tears streaming, unable to stop.

Sun Yu said, "Now that we've suffered a defeat at Goryeo's hands, the Five Barbarian Tribes beyond the northern border will be fueled by arrogance. I'm afraid peace will not last for many more years now."

The imperial envoy was also one of Sun Yu's students. He noticed You Miao's reaction and looked back at Sun Yu. After a moment of

contemplation, he said, changing the subject, “This student has heard of another piece of news. His Majesty will be holding the Grace Exams next year.”

Sun Yu nodded slowly, and the imperial envoy continued, “Chancellor Li is getting on in years. In the future, the capital will likely become the stage for the Crown Prince’s faction. The Li Family is currently assembling friends and eliminating foes. In a few years, when the Crown Prince ascends the throne, there will be another major change in government. Even if this student has the heart, there are some things I dare not do. Just a few days ago, the Vice Minister of Revenue was sentenced gravely over the food drive case…”

“Do not act rashly out of distress,” Sun Yu advised. “Stay prudent and it will be fine. There is a leeway for everything… You Miao?”

You Miao’s head was filled with only Zhao Chao’s defeat. He barely heard anything from the exchange, and it took Sun Yu calling his name twice before You Miao regained focus. He quickly bowed.

“Go out and wash your face. Then go to the library and finish transcribing my annotations of *‘The Classic of Music,’*[28] Sun Yu instructed.

You Miao nodded and went out into the large courtyard. The sun was shining brightly, and as he came to stand under a tree, he burst out into tears, unable to hold back.

Li Zhifeng was sitting in the small room beside the door, waiting for You Miao to finish his studies. When he heard the commotion, he rushed over. This was the first time he had seen You Miao cry like this, and he urgently asked, “What’s wrong? Did you get yelled at? What happened?”

You Miao didn’t respond, and only stood there sobbing incessantly. He hugged Li Zhifeng, unable to resist, and buried his head into his shoulder to continue his cries of lament. His heart was filled with sorrow, but not the words to express it.

“Zhao Chao lost…” You Miao said in between choked sobs.

Li Zhifeng stroked You Miao’s head and gave a smile. “Don’t cry.”

You Miao was having a hard time controlling his emotions, and he blubbered, “The Han lost terribly…”

“I’ll get back at your enemies for you in the future,” Li Zhifeng promised.

You Miao couldn't help snorting at the declaration and wiped his tears wryly. Earlier, when he learned of Zhao Chao's defeat, indignation and sadness overwhelmed his chest. He found it difficult to articulate to Li Zhifeng this sorrow born of his own country's defeat. It was an emotion impossible to describe with words alone. Yet, a light fluttering response from Li Zhifeng was all it took to render him conflicted on whether to keep crying or to laugh.

"Never mind," You Miao said, sounding resigned, and trudged away listlessly to do his transcriptions.

No news came from the capital again after that. Time flew by; the days grew short and the nights grew long, spring went and autumn came. And then spring came again.

This year was a year of a great harvest, and the sheer amount of grain garnered in Jiangnan had granaries bursting. Qiao Jue's tea plantation finally formally began to produce Riverwave Oolong Tea, which also went by the name "Beauty's Kiss." This was because every single leaf picked from branch tips was the best and the most tender. Moreover, as it couldn't be guaranteed that the leaves wouldn't tear even when picked by the hands of maidens, they were instead plucked with the maidens' soft lips.

You Miao's accumulated grain was at three million and eight hundred thousand pounds. Rice in Jiangnan was cheap; since the landlords weren't willing to sell it, it was stored in their granaries.

One day after the spring harvest was over, when You Miao arrived at the Sun Residence, Sun Yu didn't make him read as he usually did. Instead, he told You Miao to brew a pot of tea. You Miao was an expert brewer of excellent tea, and he had with him the Riverwave Dongding Oolong he'd swiped from Qiao Jue. Over the past few years, You Miao had done his utmost to serve Sun Yu in the hopes that he would teach him more things. The first batch of tea in the spring, the best honey of the spring harvest, the fresh plum wine of summer, the crabs harvested in the autumn, winter bamboo shoots and cured meats, as well as aged Champion Reds he had in the cellar…everything was delivered to the Sun Residence. Of course, Sun Yu also liked that he was a clever student who knew to both respect his elders and study hard. In return for You Miao's goodwill, he taught him almost all that he knew without reservations.

"You Miao," Sun Yu called.

You Miao bowed, offering the tea with both hands. “Student is here.”

Unhurriedly, Sun Yu asked him, “You have studied under me for three years. What books have you read? What have you learned?”

You Miao pondered briefly before he replied, “There is too much; this student cannot recall right at this moment.”

“You have thoroughly read the Four Books and Five Classics,” Sun Yu stated.

You Miao hastily replied, “Read, but I dare not say thoroughly.”

“About halfway. Enough to compose well-balanced essays to fool others,” Sun Yu said. You Miao didn’t dare to respond to this statement, and Sun Yu continued, “You understand to ‘know before you act.’”

“Yes, sir,” You Miao said.

“You can flip through *‘Zhuangzi’*[29] and *‘The Classics of the Way and the Virtue.’* A man must show promise, but not do what is against nature. You understand the concept of “Do Nothing,”[30] but the Barbarians won’t be discussing old Master Zhuangzi with you. When the blade is at your neck, all you can do is let nature take its course and meet the King of Hell.”

“Yes, sir. This student will duly keep this in mind,” You Miao said.

“Obscene literature should be avoided. Be sincere and genuine in your speech and actions. Do not chase after frivolous trends and speak nonsense at length.”

“Yes, sir. This student will heed this lesson.”

“I’m sure you also remember to ‘acquire knowledge by way of object study.’[31]”

You Miao was confused why Sun Yu was bringing this up and wiped at his sweat, feeling nervous. He answered, “It is shameful to speak of, but this student has always been lacking in this aspect.”

“Then let me test you a little,” Sun Yu said. “What kind of person do you wish to be?”

Very respectfully, and in full accordance with the philosophy of Object Study, You Miao answered, “Like the pine unafraid of the wind, like the rock unafraid of the waves, not sycophantical to the rich and powerful, a man of integrity who is eager to serve my country. Like the bamboo and the river; tenacious and unmovable in my heart and principles, but knowing

when to bend and conceal my power to bide my time. Giving the impression of weakness until the opportunity to retaliate arises."

Sun Yu nodded. "The unbending are easily broken; the unyielding are easily dishonored. One must not conduct oneself overly perfectly."

"Yes, yes," You Miao heeded.

"Do you still remember what you told me the first day you visited? Sun Yu asked.

The mention of it quickly jogged You Miao's memory, and he replied, "Cultivate self-discipline, bring order to the family, govern the state, and conquer the world."

"Very good." Sun Yu stroked his beard and nodded. "You are someone with ambition. The courier brought news the other day. The capital will hold the Grace Exams this year, and the Juren of every region are welcome to take the Metropolitan Exam. Go home and prepare, then depart in three days. There is no need to bid me farewell."

The Metropolitan Exam?! It had been a full three years since You Miao last traveled to the capital, so he was feeling a little at a loss at the sudden news. His life there felt like a long, long time ago—so much so that those days no longer had anything to do with him.

When Sun Yu told him to go for the exam, You Miao suddenly felt a little scared. Sun Yu caught the flash of fear across his face and was instantly outraged, his expression clouding over.

"As a man, what's the point of studying the sages' books if you don't intend on serving your country?! Had you mentioned your lack of will, I wouldn't have spent all this effort shaping you! Do you want to spend the rest of your life guarding that bit of land in Jiangnan?!"

You Miao immediately knew he was wrong and quickly explained, "No… It's not that, sir. It's just…the prospect of returning to the capital is making me a little nervous about meeting my old acquaintances."

Sun Yu sneered. "Your teacher has always known that you bear the idea of staying content in your small wealth…"

You Miao frantically said, "This student doesn't dare—"

"Listen up!" Sun Yu yelled. "If one day you can advise a wise ruler and benefit the world, then the country will be the millions of acres of fertile land for you to manage! The country will be the chessboard on which you can freely play! If you possess the ability, then why fear conquering the

world? If you possess the will, then why not be kind to the people?! View the world as your estate, see the people as your tenants—*that* is the true great benevolence!"

Sun Yu's words were like a club to the head, the blow striking You Miao awake. He dropped to his knees and bowed, answering solemnly, "This student has received guidance. I will surely not disgrace your expectations, sir."

Only then did Sun Yu's expression relax, and he nodded slowly. "You are my student; the time has come for you to go. Your level of study will not earn you the Zhuangyuan title, but a Jinshi title will not be difficult to achieve. Heed the truth that there will always be someone better than you. Do not beg for glory, do not fight for undeserved honor."

You Miao's heart was thumping in his chest. He nodded, the rims of his eyes growing red. Sun Yu then took out a letter from his breast pocket.

"You are not like your father—you did not inherit the same vulgar stench of a stingy, money-grubbing merchant, which is in itself luck. Once you remove that wastrel hat you wear, you are sure to go much farther. When you arrive in the capital, should you have nowhere to stay, follow as directed in this letter to go to the Directorate of Education. They will automatically provide you with room and board."

A rush of complicated feelings surged through You Miao as he took the letter, and immediately, he kowtowed three times in full respect to Sun Yu, which Sun Yu accepted without qualms.

You Miao couldn't quite bear to leave him, and his eyes grew redder. "Sir…"

Sun Yu said languidly, "Remember the promise you made to me—that you will cultivate self-discipline and serve your country. Remember to never commit misdeeds. Go on now."

You Miao nodded in acceptance of the sermon and took his leave. With the letter in hand, he stopped outside the second entrance of the Sun Residence, mixed emotions engulfing and overwhelming him.

Li Zhifeng was sitting inside a tea shop across the street. You Miao realized all of a sudden that, as though several decades were like a day, this man had almost never changed—he looked the same as when You Miao first met him at fifteen. You Miao was now eighteen and nearly reached the man's ears in height.

It was almost as if the rambunctious and convoluted worldly entanglements in life had nothing to do with him. You Miao crossed the street, still hugging the letter. Li Zhifeng was in the middle of listening to a storyteller. The storyteller was recounting the tale of the thirteen Barbarian generals, to which Li Zhifeng was utterly engrossed. He didn't notice You Miao until You Miao was mere steps away from him.

Li Zhifeng watched You Miao's expression closely and couldn't resist asking, "Why were you let out so early today?"

"Graduated. Time for the Metropolitan Exam," You Miao answered.

Li Zhifeng answered with a nasal affirmation, but his face still looked confused.

You Miao elaborated, "Time to head to the capital."

"Take me along?" Li Zhifeng asked.

"Of course," You Miao said. "Who else would accompany me otherwise?"

Delighted, Li Zhifeng said, "Come. Let's go home and pack."

All that parting grief that engulfed You Miao was dispersed by Li Zhifeng again. Amused, he followed Li Zhifeng back to the estate.

Li Zhifeng and You Miao didn't ride the carriage down today. They held hands as they scaled the high plains and stood atop the hills to view the entire estate. The paddy fields were lushly green in the air of spring, and oxen herders dotted the ridges. Fresh rain had just passed—the sky was blue and the land was green, scattered with black-shingled and white-bricked farmhouses everywhere. The landscape filled You Miao with a sense of achievement.

Atop the high plains was a gigantic tree; apparently, it was planted by the former owner of Shen Garden a century ago. Beneath it stood a stone slate marked with Riverwave Estate's name. You Miao took in a deep breath, feeling relaxed and happy.

"If I end up becoming a court official, I won't be able to stay home much anymore," You Miao said regretfully.

"Everyone must leave home one day when they grow up," Li Zhifeng said.

A thought struck You Miao. He tilted his head to look up at Li Zhifeng, remembering that he was forced to be a wanderer over the past ten years. What Li Zhifeng said wasn't wrong, though—as a Quanrong who went

from living beyond the border, to coming to the Midlanders' territory, and subsequently following You Miao down south to the teeming, splendid world that was Jiangnan, Li Zhifeng had moved around considerably over the last decade.

A person must always move to different places in life. If not even Li Zhifeng complained about his fate, what reason did You Miao have to whine? You Miao flashed a smile and dragged Li Zhifeng back down the hill to the manor.

Meanwhile, Zhang Wenhan was in the study reading a book You Miao had borrowed from Sun Yu. Over the past few years, every time You Miao went to Sun Yu's residence for class, he would always share everything he learned with Zhang Wenhan upon his return. Zhang Wenhan, on the other hand, had found an elder Confucian for his teacher in Yang Prefecture. Thus, when he returned to the manor, he would also exchange his lessons with You Miao. The two swapped books from the teachers with each other and would huddle to discuss the annotations. This time, Zhang Wenhan had received the news about the Metropolitan Exam as well, so You Miao told him to go home to pay respects to his parents' graves. They would depart together to the capital for the exams after noon had passed the next day.

* * *

That night, when You Miao informed Qiao Jue of his plans, Qiao Jue said, "Why didn't you tell me sooner? You're leaving first thing tomorrow? Did you give your dad's side a shout?"

It was then that You Miao realized he had completely forgotten about his dad's plans. He said dismissively, "Whatever, we'll leave him for now. If my brother is going to the capital as well, there will for sure be servants to wait on him on the road. I'll not crowd him."

Qiao Jue chuckled. "If your brother goes with you, *he'll* have to lower himself and wait on you, eh."

You Miao snorted and grinned. "That's true. So I'll let him off the hook this time."

Lying in bed that night, You Miao found sleep eluding him. Li Zhifeng was busying around the entire time, tidying and packing luggage until late into the night.

"Hey," You Miao called.

"Yep." Li Zhifeng answered and came over.

“Leave it, it’s bedtime,” You Miao said.

“I’m almost done.”

“Pack tomorrow. I’m feeling kinda uneasy, come hold me for a bit,” You Miao said.

Li Zhifeng put down what was in his hands and walked into the inner chamber. He undressed and climbed into bed, where his hands immediately started to wander. It was already spring, but his hands were chilly, and You Miao yelped when they groped inside his shirt.

“Don’t…”

Li Zhifeng shuffled over to lie on You Miao’s shoulder, his long hair cascading loosely down as he kissed his ear lovingly. He whispered, “We’re practically an old married couple already. What are you getting all shy for?”

Li Zhifeng still wore the jade pendant that You Miao had given him three years ago around his neck. It drooped down to rest against You Miao’s chest when he leaned down, settling right against You Miao’s heart. Face flushed and heart beating fast, You Miao reached up with a hand to cup Li Zhifeng’s face.

“Do you ever miss your home?” he asked.

Caught off guard by the question, Li Zhifeng looked puzzled. He broke away from kissing and sniffing at You Miao’s neck to prop himself up on his elbow. “What?”

You Miao said seriously, “Home. Beyond the border. Do you miss it?”

Li Zhifeng had followed You Miao for three years at this point, and in the past three years, You Miao found that his feelings toward Li Zhifeng had changed and shifted without him realizing it. Looking into Li Zhifeng’s eyes now, he saw an expression there that he had never seen before—one just like that of a tamed wolf.

You Miao wasn’t quite sure what kind of expression that was. Perhaps, to Li Zhifeng, he was a wolf companion that stayed constantly by his side. His eyes shimmered, deep in thought, like a wolf in its den looking at its mate.

“Why do you ask?” For the first time in his life, Li Zhifeng countered with a question of his own rather than giving a direct answer.

You Miao said, “When I think about leaving home, it feels like… leaving my mom’s embrace.”

Even he himself couldn't help but snort when he spoke the words out loud. But it really did feel like that—Riverwave Estate was left to him by Qiao Ke-er; it was his roots. It had taken an enormous amount of hard work over the last three years to get the place up and running, but now he had to leave. He really was reluctant to depart; it felt as if no matter where he went afterward, no matter where he lived, it would never be *home*.

Li Zhifeng nodded in understanding before sitting up to work open the buttons of his thin inner shirt. You Miao sat up as well to help with the buttons. Li Zhifeng took the shirt off, revealing an attractive chest, where the injuries from years past had already healed up nicely without scarring. You Miao reached out to touch the arrow wound at the small of his back; all that was left there now was a light scar.

"Let me see the one on your face."

You Miao turned Li Zhifeng's head by the jaw to look at the scar on his brow. That one was pretty much faded too; other than a line through his eyebrow where the injury once was, his brow was exceedingly handsome.

The two of them pressed skin to skin, Li Zhifeng held You Miao close with his left hand and undressed him with his right as he whispered next to his ear, "It doesn't matter to me. Home is where you are."

These words made You Miao feel like his dangling heart had suddenly found solid ground. His breathing quickened as he wrapped his arms around Li Zhifeng's neck.

"You're right."

Li Zhifeng stripped You Miao out of his clothes and held him close, their lips pressed together and their tongues intertwining. You Miao's hand trailed down Li Zhifeng's chest, all the way down to wrap around the hardness between his legs, stroking softly there while Li Zhifeng gazed earnestly at him with the tips of their noses pressed together.

"We Quanrong—we don't have a home."

Still holding You Miao, who sat astride him, Li Zhifeng applied oil and then let him sink slowly down onto his shaft. You Miao clutched his shoulders tightly, his faced buried against his shoulder and breathing short and shallow as he felt that length press into his body.

Li Zhifeng nosed at the corner of You Miao's lips, continuing in a quiet voice, "Once we find our beloved, wherever we are together, wherever we live, that is home…"

He pushed deep inside of You Miao as he spoke, pressing against that spot that made You Miao tremble and cling to his neck.

"Mn…" You Miao said. "I'll give you one."

Li Zhifeng answered quietly, "You already have."

He lowered his head to kiss along You Miao's neck and collarbones as he thrust into him below, slow and gentle. You Miao's arousal was hard and leaking and rubbed against Li Zhifeng's abdomen with every movement, making him tremble with how good it felt.

He could hardly even speak anymore, only managing to gasp out brokenly, "Don't…don't leave me."

"I won't leave you," Li Zhifeng answered, just before suddenly pushing You Miao down onto the bed, pulling out his slick-covered cock, and fucking back inside in one hard stroke.

"*Ah*!"

Li Zhifeng picked up the blanket and wrapped it around their naked bodies, sealing You Miao's lips with his own as he fucked him, drawing sweet cries from him, and only pausing a short while later when You Miao, face flushed and eyes dark with desire, was about to tip over the edge.

You Miao mumbled, "Even after I go to the capital…stay with me, just like this…"

"I will," Li Zhifeng whispered softly into a kiss.

"I don't need a wife anymore…"

"*You* are my wife…"

You Miao's heart melted at his words. Li Zhifeng held him close, pressing their bodies flush together as You Miao's hazy eyes stared at the bed curtains, feeling Li Zhifeng thrusting into him with abandon.

They went at it the whole night, only parting when the sky began to brighten. They were both drenched in sweat, but still clung to one another. Outside, a rooster crowed. Li Zhifeng tried to pull out the arm wrapped around You Miao, but it stirred You Miao awake immediately. He unconsciously reached a hand out to clutch at Li Zhifeng's wrist as he blearily opened an eye.

"I won't leave," Li Zhifeng said. "Just packing."

"Mm."

You Miao made a noise of assent, but wrapped his whole body around Li Zhifeng, clinging to his waist and refusing to let go, all the while

mumbling sleepily about something or another. Li Zhifeng smiled and watched him for a bit, giving up on getting out of bed and turning to pull him deeper into his arms instead.

Outside, Mu Yan called, “Shaoye.”

Mu Yan was all grown up now, with a voice that had cracked through puberty and ended up like a duck’s. He had a bit of a stubble, and bore a mature and earnest demeanor.

He said respectfully, “Zhang Wenhan is back from visiting his parents’ graves and is waiting for shaoye outside.”

Li Zhifeng answered, “Tell him to wait.”

Mu Yan acknowledged the instruction. You Miao didn’t even hear it, holding onto Li Zhifeng and continuing to snooze away.

A little while later, a low voice spoke from the outside again. “Shaoye.”

It was Cheng Guangwu this time. He reported from the corridor, “Lord Uncle is arranging for breakfast to be served.”

Li Zhifeng replied, “Tell him to eat first.”

Cheng Guangwu left, and nothing else happened until late morning when Mu Feng came by. However, he only stood quietly outside the chamber.

“What is it?” Li Zhifeng asked.

“The elder young master of the You Family is here,” Mu Feng answered.

“He can wait,” Li Zhifeng said.

You Miao was still sound asleep when he felt Li Zhifeng kissing him. Their breaths mingled as his consciousness began to stir, and his skin felt like it was burning under the caresses, the two of them burrowed naked and snug under the blankets as he slowly woke up. He was still half-asleep when Li Zhifeng moved to press him underneath himself again, his arousal sliding easily into him in the same movement. You Miao swallowed sleepily, his mind hazy as he wrapped his arms around Li Zhifeng, letting him fuck him.

“Wake up…” Li Zhifeng murmured quietly.

“Mm…”

You Miao swallowed with difficulty, then opened his eyes. Li Zhifeng leaned in to close the distance between their lips, his tongue pushing past to

brush against the other's. For a moment, You Miao was still overwhelmed with desire and wanted nothing more than to press their bodies closer and closer still.

Li Zhifeng asked again, "Awake yet?"

"*Ah*!" You Miao cried out in pleasure as he felt Li Zhifeng brush against that spot in him.

"Awake?" Li Zhifeng asked while he fucked leisurely in and out.

You Miao's eyes snapped open wide, brimming with tears, and the two of them kiss while entwining, until Li Zhifeng brought You Miao to climax again. As You Miao came, he could feel Li Zhifeng's cock pulsing inside of him, could feel the stickiness between his thighs when he pulled out, and knew that he, too, was sated.

"What time is it?" You Miao asked in a daze, gaining more consciousness.

"Almost noon." Li Zhifeng pecked him on the lips. "Your brother is waiting outside."

You Miao jolted awake. "Is everything packed?" he asked.

"No. You wouldn't let me go," Li Zhifeng said.

Caught between tears and laughter, You Miao said, "Finish packing, quick, I said I'd be ready to leave for the capital today."

Li Zhifeng gave an "mn" and got up to fetch clean clothes.

You Miao asked, "How many carriages are left?"

"The gifts haven't been packed yet," Li Zhifeng said, helping You Miao get dressed while still fully naked himself. You Miao reached out to stroke that half-hard length between his legs that hung heavy as a horse's, feeling his mouth go dry and his breath go faint.

"How many times did we do it last night?" You Miao asked.

"Four times," Li Zhifeng answered.

No wonder I'm so tired, You Miao thought. Excessive sexual activity was harmful to the body, but it had been so many years now, and he just couldn't help himself when it came to sleeping with Li Zhifeng every day—this guy really had some serious stamina, and was always so full of vigor it was like he would never run out.

Li Zhifeng started to get dressed after attending to You Miao, but on a whim, You Miao hooked his arms around his neck again and nuzzled against his cheek with an affectionate kiss. Li Zhifeng turned his head

slightly to look at him, then they brushed their lips together and nuzzled for a bit until You Miao pushed Li Zhifeng back down onto the bed to pin him for more kisses.

"You want more?" Li Zhifeng asked.

You Miao shook his head; he was honestly too tired to go again and only wanted to kiss him. They kissed and groped for a while longer before You Miao got up with a sigh. Awake at last, he pulled Li Zhifeng up too.

"Let's get up," he said.

With a smile playing on his lips, Li Zhifeng put on his outer robe and went out, and the boy servants came pouring into the room. The Mu brothers came to brush You Miao's hair while the rest of the boys stood in a line—they were recruited after the first ones. Qiao Jue was fond of astronomy, and so he had given the boys names based on various stars in the sky. From left to right, there were Changyuan, Weizhen, Jinxian, Yaoguang, and Shaowei. The oldest was Changyuan, who was eighteen, the same age as You Miao, and the youngest was Shaowei, who was sixteen.

Some of them were boys the tenant houses sent over to serve the young master in order to earn a bit of money to bring home, and others were purchased by Li Zhifeng from Yang, Liu, and Su prefectures. All with blue robes, straight brows, and bright eyes, they carried themselves with upright demeanors. What was more, they usually practiced archery with Li Zhifeng to strengthen their bodies. Those who practiced martial arts, no matter how little, appeared different from the average bodyguards. You Miao didn't appreciate the look of weasel-like youths, so the boy servants under him were all raised with the spirit and air of martial artists, their robes uncreased and immaculate. When they entered the room, they split off to each side of the room and went straight to work on their assigned tasks.

Mu Yan brushed You Miao's hair while Mu Feng passed over dental salt. You Miao swirled the block in his mouth, then gargled and rinsed his teeth. Tea was then served, and after You Miao took a sip, he asked, "How many people are waiting outside now?"

Mu Feng answered, "Lord Uncle and Zhang Wenhan are keeping the elder young master company and having tea. Lunch hasn't been served yet. Guangwu is guarding the carriage outside the second entrance."

You Miao had already previously talked to Qiao Jue the night before that he didn't want to bring too many people along to the capital. It'd be too

pompous if his travel was accompanied by a bunch of boy servants, raising a big fanfare—not to mention he would become an easy target for talk if he arrived at the Directorate of Education like that. Li Zhifeng's company alone was good enough. Once You Miao was settled in the capital with a house, it wouldn't be too late then to tell Qiao Jue to send the servants over.

"Once shaoye is gone, we'll have nothing left to do," Weizhen pouted. The boys all laughed.

You Miao replied lazily, "There's hassles waiting for you in the future yet, don't you worry about that. Have Cheng Guangwu lead your archery practice during the day, don't slack off."

The oldest of the boys, Changyuan, bowed. "But of course."

Shaowei said with a grin, "Shaoye, will you take us to the capital too, for a whirl?"

Mu Feng was down on one knee helping You Miao straighten the hem of his robe while Mu Yan instructed, "Bring over the white jade waist pendant."

One of the boy servants opened a box, and sitting within was a piece of white, translucent jade glistening with the luster of a crystal. It was You Miao's favorite accessory. Mu Yan fastened it on You Miao's belt, and You Miao looked himself over in the mirror.

"Sure," You Miao replied to Shaowei. "Once everything's settled, I'll buy a house in the capital and bring you all over to play."

Qiao Jue's personal attendant arrived at this time, and he inquired from outside in the corridor, "Lord Uncle has sent this humble one to inquire what wine the young master wants to have with lunch."

"A jug of the Bamboo Green from the cellar is good enough for my brother," You Miao responded.

The attendant left, and now dressed in silk brocades, You Miao stepped out of the room as well. The boy servants followed behind You Miao in two lines like stars fawning over the moon, and they headed for the main hall. When they passed by the gardens, Li Zhifeng came over in large strides to join the group, and he met eyes with You Miao.

"All packed?" You Miao asked.

Li Zhifeng gave a curt nod and walked in front of the boy servants, and with great fanfare, they entered the main hall.

You Miao had grown taller in recent years, and was now a true gentleman who was handsome and dignified. After being subjected for so long to Sun Yu's strict education—in both academic studies and how to be an upstanding person—You Miao had shed the past cheekiness and shrewish little thug act, and replaced it with the scholarly air men of books could not hide. Because he also practiced martial arts, his brow bore the unbridled carefreeness of a military man, and his clean and crisp eyebrows could barely suppress the unconcealable sharpness of his eyes.

Qiao Jue was having tea with You Hange and Zhang Wenhan, and when he saw You Miao enter the hall, he smiled. "Got up late today."

You Hange greeted, "Didi."

You Miao gave a slight nod and sat down in the master seat, smiling. "We depart today. I can't bear to leave home, so I lazed in bed for a while longer. Let's start lunch first, we're all hungry."

The servants thus entered the hall to serve lunch, filling an entire table with a dazzling assortment of dishes. When there were guests staying for a meal at home, Li Zhifeng would stand behind You Miao to serve the food and wine.

"Da-ge, are you going to the capital too?" You Miao asked.

You Hange replied self-derisively, "Nah, I'll stay at home and behave."

"Shuofang-xiong[32] is also a Juren who studied for many years. Why not attend the exams?" Zhang Wenhan asked.

"Dad specifically instructed me to send you off today," You Hange said to You Miao. "While I did study over the past few years, it's still not good enough. There also won't be anyone managing the house if I were to leave."

You Miao only nodded at those words. He didn't view You Hange with the same animosity as he did in the past. While his own Riverwave Estate couldn't compare to his father's tea hills, it was enough to sustain itself. You Dechuan hadn't spoken a word about inheritance in the past few years, and You Miao couldn't be bothered to ask about it either, so he just ignored the matter altogether.

Qiao Jue tapped the table a couple of times with his fingers and a boy servant came forward, bringing the wine.

“Hange and I have pretty much the same temperament; neither of us enjoy composing essays. So it’s good to be at home running some business, too,” Qiao Jue said with a smile.

You Miao gave an “mn,” and Qiao Jue raised his glass.

“Come, Miao-zi. May you have the blessings of the Star of Scholarship and bring home a Zhuangyuan!”

The crowd laughed boisterously at the toast. Holding his glass, You Miao sent Li Zhifeng a look, a smile playing on his lips. Li Zhifeng picked up a cup of his own, and You Miao poured half of his Bamboo Green into it. You Miao then turned to Zhang Wenhan.

“Zhang Er, you’ll have to take the exam seriously too, all right?”

Zhang Wenhan nodded, smiling. “I don’t have the fate of a Zhuangyuan. All I hope for is a Gongshi, so I won’t embarrass shaoye.”

“Study for as much as you can, go as far as you can go. Cheers!” You Miao shouted, and everyone threw back their wine.

Stomachs satiated with food and drink, You Miao stepped out of the mountain gate tipsy. All of the servants of Shen Garden had emerged to send him off. When everyone at Riverwave Estate learned that the young lord was leaving for the capital to take the state exams, they all came out, dragging their sons and daughters and senior parents to give their well-wishes in order to get that first-comer reward.

All the enthusiasm was finally making You Miao shrink a little. Well-wishes like “Good luck, shaoye” and “May shaoye be listed on the Golden Billboard[33]” were everywhere, and You Miao wanted nothing more than to burrow and hide in his carriage as quickly as he could out of embarrassment. Qiao Jue was out by the grand entrance giving out the envelopes to the tenants with a smile while Li Zhifeng harnessed the carriages. Changyuan and Shaowei were both already in the driver’s seat, waiting in their respective coaches.

“All right, all right,” You Miao said smilingly. “You can all go back now. I’ll definitely get listed on the Golden Billboard, definitely!”

Over these years, You Miao had managed the estate with generosity and took in any families who sought asylum. And so today, when he departed for the capital, the tenant households stood in a line nearly half a mile long to send him off with great reluctance.

You Hange approached the coach and said to You Miao, “Didi, Dad told me to give this to you.”

You Hange’s boy servant came over holding a heavy, ornately sculpted case. You Miao opened it, and inside were palm-sized square boxes. He quickly understood—these were tribute teas. Even the sandalwood case carrying the tea alone was significant in value.

“Put it in the carriage.” You Miao nodded and had Li Zhifeng take it.

You Hange then said, handing him a small pouch, “And this is gege’s bit of heart. I know you’re not lacking in money, but these are light. Carry them with you, and in times of need, you can use it to defend yourself.”

You Miao weighed the bag in his hands, knowing that it was all gold leaves inside.

“What about you?” You Miao asked seriously. “Da-ge, you’ve studied too over the past few years. Don’t you want to go to the capital?”

You Hange laughed self-derisively, “No, gege isn’t made for that. I’m happy to achieve Juren, it’s enough.”

You Miao joked, “You can just think of it as a fun trip to the capital, yeah?”

You Hange shuffled over to You Miao’s ears and whispered his confession, “I really can’t. Even if I go take the exams, it would only embarrass our family. Did you know? Dad hired a scholar to compose my essay for the Prefectural Exam. I only memorized and copied his work…”

You Miao’s face turned an indescribable shade when he learned this.

You Hange chuckled again. “Go on, go grab a title. Then you can return home in glory and greatness.”

You Miao nodded and mounted the coach. ’Twas the intersection of spring and summer, and the fresh, lush green wheat rolled like wave after wave in the wind, spanning outward to the horizon. Sitting inside the carriage, he gazed at Riverwave Estate, gazed at Shen Garden, gazed at his home…until all disappeared into the far distance. His heart was filled with marvel and mixed emotions as he leaned back into Li Zhifeng’s arms.

“What are you thinking about?” LI Zhifeng asked.

“My brother,” You Miao said.

“Your brother?” Li Zhifeng wondered.

You Miao confessed what You Hange told him in good humor. “I was wondering how he managed to get Juren after only studying for a few

months. He barely recognized any characters! Turns out, it was a hired scholar who wrote the essay for him, and he forced himself to memorize it for the exam!"

The ends of Li Zhifeng's lips twitched, and You Miao continued, "Money can truly make the world go 'round. No wonder my teacher didn't care to meet him."

The front window of the coach was open, and Changyuan, who was driving, turned his head back and smiled. "Shaoye, you're going to the capital because of your true talent and knowledge. You'll definitely be on the billboard!"

Truthfully, however, You Miao didn't feel very confident. Although he had studied under Sun Yu for three years and read all that needed to be read, he still couldn't be certain of the level he had achieved. Could he earn a Gongshi? Or a Jinshi? Or would he make it onto the Golden Billboard and actually be appointed a Zhuangyuan? Sun Yu had said it would be impossible for You Miao to win a Zhuangyuan title at his current level, and that he should be satisfied with a Jinshi.

Something occurred to You Miao, and he asked, "How much money did we bring?"

To think he had actually forgotten about something as important as money for a trip. But all the ins and outs of the estate's account were managed by Li Zhifeng and Qiao Jue; Qiao Jue handled sales and income, while Li Zhifeng managed the manor's expenses. All You Miao needed to see was the total sum at the end of each month—except most of the time it was in one ear and out the other for whatever was reported to him. He only vaguely knew that he had about five thousand or so silver, and four granaries that stored hundreds of thousands of pounds of grain. Travel to the capital was a major affair, so even if he was too careless to ask about money, Qiao Jue would've already exchanged the silver to paper bills for him.

Li Zhifeng replied, "At the beginning of the year, I went to Yang Prefecture to exchange two thousand silver worth of bills, and they're all on me. Qiao Jue also packed three hundred taels of silver in the chest, enough for you to spend for a whole year. Remember to haggle when you buy slaves, though."

You Miao hadn't expected Li Zhifeng to still remember that incident. He burst out laughing and leaned on Li Zhifeng, squeezing and nuzzling him, laughing so hard his tears were rolling.

Li Zhifeng continued, "Is that enough? If not, there's still a few hundred silver at the shop in Yang Prefecture. We can go withdraw money now."

You Miao contemplated briefly and said, "Should be enough."

"Well, damn!" Changyuan couldn't resist laughing when he overheard.

"You think I'm talking about pomp. Nothing of the sort," You Miao said. "Your young master's got a gang of friends who have now risen to power. The imperial court will be that damned bastard Li Yan's world in the future, so if I want to untangle that mess, I really won't cut it without at least two thousand silver."

Li Zhifeng contemplated for a moment, then said, "So we don't have enough? Let's detour to go make a withdrawal."

"It's fine," You Miao replied. "We'll stick to this amount for now."

Back then, when You Miao spent money, it was easily tens and hundreds of silver. He was young then; things were different now.

There were many people he needed to see when he entered the capital. The Imperial College of the Directorate of Education, the Chancellor's Residence, Li Yan, Ping Xi, Lin Luoyang… The affluent friends he used to fool around with had all reached the age to fool around in the political arena. Perhaps everyone had changed and their hearts were no longer the same as when they were youths—especially Li Yan. Every time a capital official came down south to Jiangnan, what they spoke of the most was the Li father and son.

The Li Family currently dominated in power and influence, and had become a mainstay of Tianqi. The Li faction held immense power, not to mention they had the recognition and support from the Crown Prince… There was also the Third Prince Zhao Chao, a comrade who had once faced life-and-death adversities with You Miao. Now that he had been defeated in battle, he was scorned by the entire capital.

Treacherous tensions flowed in the capital. No doubt a large sum of money would be spent, and no doubt there would be no lack of conflicts and intrigues between factions. You Miao abruptly realized that what he had unintentionally distanced himself from three years ago now had to be faced

head-on; there was no escaping it. What the passing years had given them might have appeared to be leisurely time, but in truth, they were like a whetstone that had sharpened them, forcing them to grow up.

Fortunately, You Miao wasn't some rusty sword that was thrown aside and forgotten in the corner. He couldn't help but sigh and marvel at his impending future.

"Am I off to the exams to serve my country, or am I off to war?!"

[Arc 2 End]

ARC 3: THE WHOLE RIVER RED

满江红

【南宋】岳飞
怒发冲冠，凭阑处，潇潇雨歇。
抬望眼，仰天长啸，壮怀激烈。
三十功名尘与土，八千里路云和月。
莫等闲，白了少年头，空悲切。

靖康耻，犹未雪；臣子恨，何时灭？
驾长车，踏破贺兰山缺。
壮志饥餐胡虏肉，笑谈渴饮匈奴血。
待从头，收拾旧山河，朝天阙！

The Whole River Red

Yue Fei[34] (1103-1142)

Bristling with rage, I stand over watch just as the storm stops.

Looking up, I heave a long cry to the Heavens as lofty passions overwhelm me.

Thirty years of achievements—only dust and dirt;

Eight thousand miles of road—changing clouds and moon.

Do not wait in idleness until your youth turns white-haired, and despair!

The Humiliation of Jingkang[35] is yet to be erased;

When can the anger of subjects be extinguished?

I will ride long the chariots and trample the strongholds of Mount Helan.

When our great soldiers hunger on the road, they will eat Barbarian flesh;

When our great soldiers thirst in conversation, they will drink Hun blood.

I will reclaim our mountains and rivers anew—wait until I report victory to the Emperor!

[Chapter 22]

The capital in the late spring was mantled in ten miles of peach blossoms.

You Miao loved the capital best in springtime and autumn. The flurry of peach blossoms in the late spring and the flaming red maples of deep autumn were unlike Jiangnan—where willow catkins dominated and flew everywhere in the wind, relentlessly smothering one's face, and where spring was so warm and sticky that it befuddled the mind; a real pain in the behind.

The capital had barely changed in the last three years—except for the city gates, which were a bit rundown. Carts and carriages went in and out, and there were people crying by the gates.

You Miao had already seen a number of hungry refugees along the way who had set up tents next to the official highways. But he hadn't expected the capital's gate inspection to become this strict.

"Where from?" The City Guard Captain took their travel papers.

"Liu Prefecture," You Miao answered. "Here for the exams."

"Well now, a Juren, are you?" the captain said. "Keep your head down once you enter the city. There's a curfew at night, no outside activity after hours."

A night curfew, even? You Miao thought. *That's never been a rule in the past.*

The captain questioned the people in the back. "What about you?"

Zhang Wenhan glanced at him and handed over his travel document. The captain examined the paperwork and said, "A Juren, too. Go on, then."

You Miao entered the city with his personal servants in tow. Changyuan turned his head back and asked, "Shaoye, where do we go now?"

"Get inside." You Miao climbed out of the coach with a smile. "Li Zhifeng and I will drive. Shaowei, you guys in the back can just follow me."

Li Zhifeng's lips curled upward into a light smirk and took over the reins, sitting side by side with You Miao on the driver's seat before he spurred the horse with a crisp, "*Hah*!"

The horse carriages traversed the main avenue of the city. The houses on either side of the road in the capital looked magnificent; they seemed to have been renovated, but the sight of them was jogging a different sort of feeling inside You Miao.

"You remember that place? You Miao patted Li Zhifeng's shoulder. "Look over there. Bamboo Alley. It's where they sell ceramics."

On the right side of them was a large three-leveled building. Li Zhifeng chuckled.

"I remember. Which road shall we take? Through the east market?"

"Sure," You Miao said. "Let's go to the Directorate of Education first. I'll go greet that uncle of mine a couple of days after."

The two carriages first crossed Zhenglong Street before they headed down Qianqiu Bridge toward the north of the city. A verdant stream traversed through the entire capital, and upon its surface floated peach blossom petals in abundance. Languid on the spring day, the ladies of Tingyu Pavilion gathered on the bridge, leaning against the railings as they watched passersby jostling about the crowded markets.

"Well, now." One of the girls giggled charmingly. "If even the driver is this handsome, I wonder who's sitting inside the carriage?"

You Miao, appearing like a complete rascal with one foot propped up, tilted his head to look at them, finding the situation hilarious. He whistled. "Is that bugger Li Yan not keeping you company, Liu Shaling?"

A graceful and quiet woman who looked just over twenty years of age gave You Miao a second look when she heard his teasing. Shock colored her brow when she recognized him.

"It's you!" she exclaimed.

It had been three years since You Miao left, and now he looked indescribably snazzy. He flashed her a polite smile as the horse carriage crossed the bridge and entered West Street. There were many soldiers along the way, and armed security was three times stricter compared to three years ago. You Miao had merely stolen a glimpse and he was immediately noticed.

"Who goes there?!" A troop of patrolling soldiers came over on horseback, so You Miao had to stop. One of the soldiers demanded, "Where are you from?"

You Miao took out the travel papers again, but the soldier was staring suspiciously at Li Zhifeng. “What about him?”

“He’s my servant,” You Miao said.

Li Zhifeng stared squarely back at the soldier, unfazed. The whole troop locked eyes with him for a moment, then they started clamoring.

“A Barbarian?” questioned one of the soldiers.

“No,” You Miao denied. “A Quanrong.”

“How can you bring a Quanrong in?!” the captain demanded. “Your name is You Miao, right? Come with me to the Court.”

You Miao was irritated now, and he demanded, “Why are we going to the Supreme Court?”

“The capital is investigating every Barbarian to prevent spies from mixing in! You get it?” the captain reproached.

Li Zhifeng spoke up at last, “I’m a slave. He bought me three years ago.”

“And the slave deed?” the captain demanded. “How can you prove he’s a Quanrong slave?”

You Miao was furious on the inside, and anxiousness creased his brows as he stared at Li Zhifeng, unspeaking. However, Li Zhifeng was calm, and he easily peeled off his top robe, revealing the wolf tattoo on his back and the word branded on his neck. This finally stopped the soldiers from further questions.

The captain looked at Li Zhifeng, then at You Miao. In the end, he only gave a stern warning, “Mind your servant, and don’t cause trouble!”

Once the troop was gone, You Miao cursed inwardly, *Fuckers. I’ll report you to Nie Dan later and make you regret this*. You Miao had been in a good mood, but now he was seething with fire within.

“Don’t be mad,” Li Zhifeng said.

Oddly enough, it was Li Zhifeng comforting him. An idea struck You Miao, and he looked around, checking their surroundings before driving the carriage into a small alleyway. As the voices of the crowd gradually faded, Li Zhifeng sidled over and gently pecked his cheek.

“It doesn’t matter what others say about me, as long as you don’t think of me as a slave.”

You Miao felt a bit better. “I never thought of you as one…”

But Li Zhifeng's words struck something deep within him. If he didn't think of Li Zhifeng as a slave…then what did he think of him as?

"Hey." You Miao nudged him with his elbow. "What are you thinking about?"

Li Zhifeng kept spacing out, but he snapped back when he felt the poke. "I was thinking about the spies thing. Are there spies in the city?"

That brought You Miao to his senses, and he quickly refocused, remembering Sun Yu's parting lecture. He was no longer the same proud and ignorant child, and he couldn't always act based on his own pleasure.

The capital was being this strict in investigating Barbarian spies—what did this imply?

"Is war coming?" You Miao wondered.

Li Zhifeng didn't respond. The horse carriage exited the alleyway and came to a large, quiet street somewhere. It was now close to evening, and barely anyone was out save for some servants here and there sweeping the front doors.

The Directorate of Education was an institution that was centuries old, and it governed all the national exams as well as the talent-screening locations. The main building was situated on Sanqi Street, close to the six ministries, and the place they had arrived at was the institution established by the Directorate of Education called the National University. It was also called the Imperial College in previous dynasties, and so the students continued to use its old name.

Back when You Miao studied in the capital, it was at Moxiang Hall that he attended school.

"You guys," You Miao called as he alighted the coach, "Changyuan, you and Shaowei can drive one of the carriages to the west of Changlong Lane. Keep a good hold on the shopping list that Little Uncle gave you and go stay at an inn for the night. Tomorrow, come give me a shout before you go shopping. Only Li Zhifeng needs to stay and wait on me."

The two boy servants bowed, then moved all the luggage in one coach to the other, emptying it out before driving it away.

You Miao then turned to Li Zhifeng, "Head to the back and find the backyard beyond the enclosure wall. You can park the carriage there. I'll go find Professor Jiang now."

Li Zhifeng made a nasal sound of acknowledgment and hopped onto the carriage to start unloading the luggage while You Miao took Zhang Wenhan inside.

The National University only had about a thousand students enrolled, and there weren't many people on campus except for a few humble students in coarse clothing. Some were sitting in the corridors reading, and some were playing cuju[36] in the yard. As it was dusk, most of the students had gone to eat dinner. The campus itself comprised of a giant faculty building at the front, with a number of school halls behind it. Going deeper into the campus was the library, and finally, the student dormitories in the back courtyard. The dormitory was a massive complex with three entrances and six long corridors that led to hundreds of rooms. In the year of its peak occupancy, it accommodated tens of thousands of people. There were also crabapple trees growing in the yards.

With Sun Yu's letter in hand, as well as his and Zhang Wenhan's calling cards, You Miao went to meet the teacher in Professors' Hall on the west side of the campus. Yet when he came face to face with the professor, he abruptly discovered that it was the old Confucian scholar who had once taught him and his gang of wastrels.

"Sir." You Miao greeted with a smile. "Hope you've been well?"

The professor nodded slowly as he ripped open the calling card. Then, as if it was coming back to him, he said, "You Miao, You Ziqian, from Liu Prefecture…"

"That's me," You Miao said sheepishly. "The one sir punished three years ago by having me stand outside class—but then I ran off on my own. You Miao."

The memory returned in a jiffy, and Professor Jiang pointed at You Miao, speechless for the moment.

"You… You…!" Professor Jiang exclaimed angrily, "I was wondering why you didn't look like a good person!

Not knowing whether to laugh or cry, You Miao could only kowtow respectfully to Professor Jiang. "This student was naughty and unruly in his youth. Pray sir will have mercy and forgive this student."

Professor Jiang gave You Miao a surprised look, then nodded a moment later. "You…may rise."

When You Miao rose to his feet, Professor Jiang began to ramble, swaying his head. “It’s been ten years…since Sun Chengyan left, hmm… Jinshi of the Third Year of Qingshuo. He was my…my peer…”

He took the letter out to read, but under the fading sunlight, his old eyes were blurry.

You Miao spoke up, “Sir, shall I read it for you?”

Professor Jiang grunted with a nod, then leaned back on the bamboo chair, half-closing his eyes. Thus, with measured cadence, You Miao read the letter. In it, Sun Yu reminisced about past peer affections, then mentioned You Miao was appointed the Jieyuan of Liu Prefecture. Professor Jiang was rather surprised by the news, and he blinked open his eyes.

“Oh? You got Jieyuan? Your dad didn’t buy you that title, did he?”

You Miao smiled sheepishly. “This, I do not know.”

“The Metropolitan Exam will take place in the eighth month; I hope you’ve thought it through. We’re not like Liu Prefecture around here,” Professor Jiang warned.

“Yes, sir.” You Miao then continued to read, “There is another presumptuous request: please allow my little pupil and Zhang Wenhan to stay at the National University…”

You Miao played a small trick and slipped Zhang Wenhan’s name in there.

Professor Jiang nodded. “The back courtyard isn’t full; the two of you can find a place to stay. The keys are at the Student Hall.”

You Miao respectfully acknowledged the instruction, and Professor Jiang said, “Go on, then. Compose an essay for me in a few days. I want to see what Sun Chengyan has taught you.”

You Miao was about to bow and take his leave when he remembered another thing. He asked, “Professor, am I allowed to visit the library?”

“Naturally,” Professor Jiang replied. “But you cannot bring books in, nor can you take books out. There will be a body search before entering the library.”

Having gotten the permission, You Miao and Zhang Wenhan headed straight for the back courtyard as soon as they left the Professors’ Hall.

“He’s the teacher here at the Imperial College?” Zhang Wenhan asked.

“There are many teachers at the National University, each teaching a different course. He doesn’t do many lectures anymore, though, probably because he’s getting on in age. He already stopped teaching, back in the day. It was Chancellor Li who specifically requested for him to educate me, Li Yan, and our gang at Moxiang Hall.”

Zhang Wenhan nodded, processing this information. You Miao went to the Student Hall’s concierge to collect the keys. The dormitory on this side consisted entirely of single rooms, and there were twenty-four of those rooms in one large courtyard. One person per room, and it was in a surprisingly tranquil environment.

“Here for the exams, or for studies?” the concierge asked.

You Miao smiled and said, “Both.”

“Are you a Juren?” the concierge inquired.

You Miao answered with an affirmative “mn” and stepped aside so Zhang Wenhan was also visible. “He’s a Juren too.”

“The sixth yard on the west side, Riverside Orchid House.”

They each got a room to themselves. Something came to You Miao’s mind, and he asked, “Do all Juren come here to stay?”

“Not everyone,” the concierge replied. “Only those without a place to stay come to the National University. There’s a curfew in the capital. Once the night hits, you’re not allowed to go out anymore. Follow the rules, you hear me?”

You Miao nodded. When he heard voices out in the yard, he thought, *No wonder.* The Juren from all over the country had come to the capital for the Metropolitan Exam, and without a place to stay, they poured into the National University.

“Where’s Li Zhifeng?” Zhang Wenhan asked.

You Miao rarely came to the campus in the past, so he didn’t quite remember the way. “Go around the back and see?” he suggested. They were standing in one of the courtyards and You Miao was too lazy to search, so he simply started yelling over the walls, “Li Zhifeng! *Li Zhifeng*!”

A whistle answered them a moment later from the east side, so You Miao sent Zhang Wenhan in that direction to find Li Zhifeng and help bring the luggage in. All that yelling brought the five or six students living there out into the yard, however.

You Miao gave a quick wave to the crowd staring at him, and introduced himself, “You Ziqian, from Liu Prefecture.”

The other students cupped their hands toward You Miao in a salute and gave their own names. Some were from the Sichuan region, some were from Vietnam, and others from Jing Prefecture.

Zhang Wenhan opened the doors of the two assigned rooms to air them out, then turned around and cupped his hands in a quick salute to the yard as well.

“Zhang Mohuai of Yang Prefecture,” he said, then quickly went off in search of Li Zhifeng.

The introductions made, the students surrounded You Miao to make conversation, which You Miao was all too happy to oblige with a smile. He had always been easygoing, not to mention handsome, so he was naturally eye-catching. The Juren staying in the dormitory were from all over the country, and chose to stay here because they were poor. If they had even just a teeny bit of money, they would have gone to stay at the inns. The majority of them wore coarse student robes and dangled a copper coin pretending to be a pendant with a cloth cap to fasten their hair—seldom was anyone dressed as nicely as You Miao.

You Miao conversed with them about anything under the sun until Li Zhifeng entered the yard hauling several large chests.

“You brought this much stuff with you to the capital?” someone asked You Miao.

You Miao quickly replied modestly, “It’s nothing but sundries. There’s also native produce from home, to be given as gifts to friends.”

He gestured Li Zhifeng to open a chest as he spoke, and offered some trinkets to the students. Some waved to decline the gesture, others did indeed approach to peruse the offers and thanked You Miao as they collected the food. Li Zhifeng and Zhang Wenhan busied about while You Miao only stood there, talking. By the time they’d finished moving, more students had joined the crowd since they had finished their meals, and they greeted the newcomer You Miao.

“Well, damn.” One of the tall and lanky students took a glimpse at You Miao’s luggage and smiled, but he didn’t say anything else.

You Miao knew that he had already become a young master in everyone’s eyes, but he couldn’t be bothered to explain himself. He turned

to Li Zhifeng, “Where’s the horse and carriage?”

“The horse is in the stables,” Li Zhifeng replied. “The carriage is parked by the backyard’s wall.”

Zhang Wenhan came over. “Shaoye, everything’s in place.”

“Let’s go eat, then.” You Miao turned to the crowd. “Good brothers, may I ask whether the National University covers meals?”

The students were all watching Zhang Wenhan and You Miao, trying to guess their backgrounds.

“I saw the meal hall, it’s on the north side. Let’s go,” Li Zhifeng said as he came out of You Miao’s room and locked the door behind him.

You Miao nodded cheerfully, then took Li Zhifeng and Zhang Wenhan to the meal hall. The meals offered at the National University were only simple rice and salted vegetables. The meat was mostly lean with very few fatty bits, and it was separately served in small bowls—and requesting extra would mean extra cash. Yet even if one did spend the money for more meat, there was only a bit of pickled mustard greens pairing the crumbs of fatty meat. You Miao had a hard time swallowing this all down.

The meal hall was fairly empty, with only a single student sitting at the far end of a long table, watching the three newcomers as he ate.

Li Zhifeng asked, “What do you want to eat? I’ll go buy it.”

“Don’t worry about it… It’s late, curfew is coming soon,” You Miao said dejectedly.

“I’ll just be quick,” Li Zhifeng said.

“We’ll see tomorrow. Let’s just fill our stomachs and go to bed,” You Miao said.

There was also nowhere on campus to take a bath, and boiling water was forbidden; baths had to be taken outside the university in bathhouses. You Miao was travel-worn and dirty, but he could barely keep his eyes open, so once curfew began, he extinguished the lights and went to bed early, holding Li Zhifeng as he drifted off.

The next day, there was already breakfast available when You Miao woke up. The early morning fog hadn’t completely dispersed, and Zhang Wenhan was outside unpacking while Li Zhifeng swept the front corridor. The front doors of the other Juren students’ rooms were a mess; only You Miao’s front door was swept perfectly clean.

As soon as You Miao was awake, Li Zhifeng was there to tend to him. Zhang Wenhan also came into the room with clothes, shaking them open and waiting to dress You Miao. A few students hung around by the entrance, peeking in and looking as if they were witnessing a strange happening—and indeed it was strange; a Juren serving another Juren.

You Miao noticed this as well, and said, "Zhang Wenhan, you don't need to mind me. Just worry about yourself. It won't be good if word of this gets out."

"Who cares what they say?" Zhang Wenhan said. "Shaoye will always be shaoye."

"You were never my servant in the first place," You Miao reasoned. "We kept each other company back at the estate, and I've thought of you as a friend all this time."

Zhang Wenhan replied, "If it wasn't for shaoye taking me in, Wenhan would've had to pack up, and would've wound up drifting with only a few books in my possession. I wouldn't have achieved what I have today."

You Miao knew Zhang Wenhan was a man who valued friendships and knew to repay kindness, so there was no persuading him. But then on second thought, he nonetheless chided him, "You can't act like this when we go out and meet officials, though."

Zhang Wenhan nodded and You Miao stopped trying to force the issue. Instead, he dismissed him to go have breakfast.

"What's for breakfast at the meal hall?" You Miao asked.

"Dough balls and pickles," Li Zhifeng replied.

Just the sound of it made You Miao nauseous. "I don't wanna eat that."

Li Zhifeng brought a robe and draped it over You Miao. "I know you won't eat that, so I bought chicken congee and some cakes."

You Miao's appetite was instantly whetted, and he moved to sit down in the corridor where three food boxes were sitting. Zhang Wenhan was in the middle of dividing the dishes and setting out the chopsticks. There were three bowls of hot chicken congee, a stack of nine fragrant and waxy osmanthus rice-flour cakes, a plate of pulled barbeque duck, and a bowl of tea eggs.

"Let's dig in," You Miao said, and the three began their breakfast.

There were students who came out to the corridors to wash up, greeting them as they went, but when they passed by, their eyes couldn't

help but linger on the food. Their stares made You Miao incredibly uncomfortable, but even though he thought of moving back into the room, he was reluctant to part with such a beautiful spring morning.

"Man, it's hard no matter where you live. Rich people have rich people problems, and poor people have poor people problems," You Miao commented.

Li Zhifeng grinned and Zhang Wenhan said with a laugh, "Who cares what they think."

"Blocking talk is harder than blocking the river." You Miao tapped his bowl with his chopsticks and pointed at Zhang Wenhan. "Ease off. Or else you'll get reported before the exams even start."

Zhang Wenhan was laughing so hard he was having trouble holding onto his chopsticks. He replied, "I hear shaoye thrives in the capital. Who'd dare report you?"

You Miao said with a straight face, "Who said? Nothing of the sort."

"I heard my teacher say so," Zhang Wenhan said. "He said shaoye is popular in the capital, and even the Chancellor's son needs to act courteously around you."

You Miao replied, "I had a few buddies back then, that's all. Li Yan? Courteous to me? Please…"

As they chatted, Changyuan and Shaowei came and stopped in the yard, standing at attention.

"Good morning, shaoye," Changyuan said.

More and more students were gradually rising, and they all stood there watching as if they were laughing at You Miao—he had brought all the pomp at home to the National University. *Heh. How interesting.*

You Miao didn't shrink from them, however. "Have you guys had breakfast?"

"We just got up and came here first for orders," Changyuan replied.

"Take the shopping list with you and go to the west market. Eat whatever you want and expense it to the public account. Bring me the oolong tea gift case later, it was forgotten during the unloading yesterday."

Changyuan bowed and left with Shaowei with him. You Miao didn't fill his stomach the night before, so he inhaled five pieces of the rice-flour cake in one go, downed a large bowl of congee, and devoured three tea eggs before he said, satisfied, "Boil some water, let's brew some tea."

Li Zhifeng put away the table and Zhang Wenhan went to retrieve the brazier while You Miao simply continued to sit in the corridor. A band of students had returned from breakfast and were discussing where they were going to play. Seeing how You Miao's servants busied about all morning, they found it rather amusing. Immediately, some of them went over to greet him.

"I hear you people from Liu Prefecture can't live without tea," someone said, chuckling.

"Come now, it's just habit," You Miao said conversationally. "Just like how you guys in Ji Prefecture love hot spice, am I right? Please, Zheng-xiong."

You Miao shuffled over to make room for the man to sit, but the band of students was discussing where to go.

Someone asked, "You-xiandi, Zheng Yong, Zhang Mohuai, do the three of you want to join us on a stroll to admire the spring scenery?"

"Nah, I've only just arrived at the capital; I haven't acclimatized yet, so I'm too lazy to move. You guys go play," You Miao said with a smile.

Zheng Yong, the one from Ji Prefecture, told them, "I'm going to study for a bit."

Zhang Wenhan didn't even bother answering verbally and only waved his hand as he continued to pour tea. Just then, someone else arrived. It was a middle-aged man dressed in elegant robes, with a jade pendant dangling from his belt matched with a jade thumb ring around his finger. He was escorted into the yard by a bunch of bodyguards. The students were all surprised by the sudden arrival, and they fell silent, thinking this was someone from the government here to apprehend someone.

"What's happening?" People were blocking You Miao's view, so he couldn't see.

"An official is here. Does shaoye know him?" Zhang Wenhan asked.

Li Zhifeng suddenly spoke up, "It's someone from the Chancellor's Residence, the third butler Li Mo."

The middle-aged man asked the yard, "Excuse me, is Young Master You from Liu Prefecture here?"

"Here," You Miao responded. "What's going on? Move aside, guys, I can't see… Ah! I was wondering who it was! So it's you. Come, come, have some tea."

The middle-aged man pulled out an invite from his sleeve and approached to hand it to You Miao.

"My young master has invited Ping Xi of the Ministry of Revenue, Sima Huang of the Supreme Court, Academician Ling's young master, Qin Shaonan of the Ministry of Rites, as well as a few other Juren of the capital. On the fifteenth of the fourth month, a feast will be hosted and a play will be staged at Qinhe Lodge in order to welcome Young Master You's return. I shall decline tea; I must head to the palace later."

You Miao took the invite. "Sure. Go back and tell Li Yan that I'll definitely show when the time comes." A thought occurred to him, and he teased with a snicker, "That bugger Li Yan went to Tingyu Pavilion last night, didn't he? Not very well-behaved of him."

It was an easy guess. There was no way Li Yan would know about his arrival in the capital so quickly, but yesterday upon the bridge, You Miao had shown his face to Tingyu Pavilion's Liu Shaling—on purpose. When Li Yan went to sleep with his long-time sweetheart, she would have brought it up. He didn't expect Li Yan to go to her that very night, though. He must've planned the party and sent him the invite as soon as he learned You Miao was back in town.

The middle-aged man appeared awkward at You Miao's teasing and simply bowed in response before taking his leave.

The students whispered to each other. No one knew who You Miao's backing was, and the way they looked at You Miao changed. At first, they were under the impression You Miao was just an average young master—yet that butler had rolled out a list of names whose official positions stunned the entire crowd.

* * *

After the students scattered and left, You Miao finished his round of tea and felt re-energized again. Zheng Yong exchanged a few pleasantries with him, but judging from You Miao's expression, he didn't dare try to cozy up to him, so he took his leave, saying he was heading back to his room to study.

"Does shaoye have errands to run today?" Zhang Wenhan asked.

"Naw, I'll just stroll around the Imperial College," You Miao said. "Wait here until Changyuan brings the case of tea, then you can go do what you want."

Zhang Wenhan was thinking of studying in the library, so he nodded in acknowledgment. You Miao then changed his robes, fastened his waist pendant, and took off with Li Zhifeng.

For You Miao, he simply wanted to walk around the Imperial College. After all, it had been years since he was last here, and that was when he was still young. Back then, he had only just arrived in the capital when he acquainted Li Yan in Moxiang Hall. He attended school properly in the first three months, but once he and the other boys became closer, he was led astray by those rascally friends and deserted his studies to fool around instead.

"Look there." You Miao looked into a courtyard from its entrance and said to Li Zhifeng, "This used to be where we studied."

"Didn't you escape your studies?" Li Zhifeng asked.

You Miao laughed awkwardly. "I still had to come from time to time. Do you wanna meet Li Yan in a few days?"

"Might as well," Li Zhifeng replied.

"Do you still hate him?" You Miao asked.

"Nothing to hate him about," Li Zhifeng said. "If it wasn't for him buying me, I wouldn't have met you."

"Mn." You Miao smiled at that.

He wasn't in the same position as he used to be anymore. When he met Li Yan, what he should say and what should be said of their past friendship all needed to be carefully considered before the words left his lips. The friendship he had shared with Li Yan, Ping Xi, and the others was no longer as simple as it had once been when they were young; there were now far too many complicated elements mixed in. Should You Miao attach himself to Li Yan, or maintain the current proper drifting distance? This was honestly a major issue that had been giving You Miao a headache. Three years ago, You Dechuan and You Deyou had already been nagging him to pick his team and stand on a firm footing, but You Miao still didn't have any concrete plans, even now…

After all, Zhao Chao was also here in the capital.

You Miao mulled over his options, but he knew deep down that he and Zhao Chao shared a much deeper friendship and bond. With Li Yan's gang, only joy could be shared; not adversities. After all, everyone had been a wastrel in their youth—when there was money and power involved, they

could all gather and hail each other as brothers and call each other gege and didi as sweetly as honey. But the truth was, they were just in it to win the most advantage for themselves. In other words, it was mutual exploitation. The Li father and son were powerful, and so all the other factions leaned toward them for their own benefit. If anything was to go south, however, the rats would flee the sinking ship.

Zhao Chao was the one who genuinely cared about friendships, except he had bad luck and was fated to suffer many setbacks in his life.

You Miao stared at Li Zhifeng, but didn't speak. Li Zhifeng arched an eyebrow, but didn't voice his question either, and the two stood there simply in silence. You Miao's eyes darted around like a clever little fox, the gears in his mind turning, then he turned around and silently walked away from the courtyard, deep in thought.

If he must side with a faction, then he was already on Zhao Chao's side. He recalled how, three years ago, the gang often told him that the Third Prince had caught a glimpse of You Miao during the Lantern Festival and subsequently desired to summon him to the palace as a Study Companion. Perhaps from that point on, even if You Miao didn't side with Zhao Chao, he had no choice but to join his team.

And then later, at the border where the snowstorm raged, Zhao Chao fought to protect him at the risk of his own life and even got one of his molars broken.

It was the first time You Miao had ever met someone like Zhao Chao. A complete stranger—someone he'd never even seen before, and neither of them beholden to the other in any way—and yet he would nevertheless protect him. In the time after that, You Miao would often think of that incident.

Exchanging letters with Zhao Chao and discussing the Goryeo war front had made it seem as if they had seen each other often over the passing years. They had gradually gone from strangers who never interacted, to comrades in arms. But no matter how close he'd become with Zhao Chao, nothing would ever match the rattling shock he'd experienced that night when imprisoned and Zhao Chao had tongued a tooth into his mouth.

He must protect Zhao Chao, regardless of whether he gained or lost power.

But when was the best time to go seek him? You Miao still couldn't make up his mind. The meeting would happen sooner or later; he just had to detour around Li Yan's group, otherwise it'd complicate things.

You Miao came to the front halls of the Imperial College. This was where the students received guests, and there were chess tables everywhere with game pieces on them. You Miao absent-mindedly picked up the pieces and arranged them in a formation. At least a hundred students had gathered here this morning, a considerable number, and amidst the buzz of all the voices, no one noticed when he sat down in the corner.

Should he have Li Zhifeng deliver a letter? Set a time? You Miao was in the dark about Zhao Chao's current status, and he also had no clue what he could do to help him. If all went well and he managed to achieve Gongshi, then once he passed the Palace Exam, he could enter court as an official. Maybe he would still need to curry Li Yan's favor. In any case, he would think of how he could aid Zhao Chao once he became an official.

He had already heard during his journey that the situation in the north wasn't stable. Everyone was on edge in the capital. Perhaps war would break out in the next few years. You Miao kind of wanted to enter the Ministry of Revenue—could the Ministry of Revenue help Zhao Chao? No, that Ministry was pretty much the Ping Family's domain… These matters were like dominos; tip one piece and everything else would be affected. A million confused thoughts swarmed You Miao's mind and organizing them was no simple task.

In the past, it had always been Sun Yu who talked, and You Miao listened. But now the day had come when he had to face an endless stream of difficult problems by himself. He was finally beginning to feel the hardship of not having enough brains to go around. He was still deep in thought when Li Zhifeng nudged him.

"What?" Confused, You Miao looked up from the chess formation and turned his head to Li Zhifeng.

"Tang Hui."

Li Zhifeng gestured You Miao to look to the side, and when You Miao snapped back to reality, he realized that the entire great hall had fallen silent; the students' chatter had stopped.

A military officer was standing not far away, and soldiers in full gear lined up outside the hall. Judging by their getup, they looked to be the

imperial guard.

"Where is he? Lead me to him," the military officer demanded of a student.

You Miao called out to them before the student moved, however. "Tang-da-ge!"

Tang Hui's face lit up when he turned his head and saw You Miao, and he made his way over to him. "I've been looking all over for you. How could you come to the capital without saying a word to anybody; running here to stay at the Directorate of Education instead?"

"My teacher made me stay at the Imperial College. It's perfect, though; there are still several months left before the exam, so I can just focus on studying. Who are you looking for?" You Miao asked.

"For you, who else?" Tang Hui said.

"How did you know I came?" You Miao was curious.

Tang Hui replied, "I was on duty this morning and overheard the people at the Chancellor's Residence say that you're currently staying at the Imperial College… Good going, eh? Jieyuan of Liu Prefecture…"

You Miao's heart stopped. Tang Hui was the Deputy Supervisor of the Imperial Army, but he heard the news from the *Chancellor's* Residence?

"Wait a sec." You Miao stopped him. "Where did you hear this again?"

"What?" Tang Hui said. "I heard the people from the Chancellor's Residence talking while patrolling the city. His Highness the Third Prince heard that you're back, and is on his way over…"

You Miao inwardly griped that Li Yan had probably purposely leaked this news to Zhao Chao for the sole purpose of testing his reaction. Fucking hell, why were these people so scheming? This was too shady.

The hall was so quiet one could hear a pin drop; everyone was trying to listen in on You Miao and Tang Hui's conversation, so You Miao said, "Tang-da-ge, just wait here for a moment. Let me go change and you can take me to His Highness's place in a bit."

Tang Hui quickly replied, "Oh, no worries. You go do your thing. Gege will just send someone to pass on the message. His Highness did say that he was coming personally to see you, though."

"I'll go back to my room and wait for him, then," You Miao said. "Just lead him to Riverside Orchid House later."

He rose to his feet and returned to the dormitory in the back courtyard. Next to the corridor, there just so happened to be a tea table carved from the root of a tree, and Zhang Wenhan and Zheng Yong were sitting there, chatting leisurely.

"Zhang Wenhan," You Miao called. "Go back to your room, let me have the table. I'm meeting a guest."

Zhang Wenhan got up to leave and Zheng Yong went with him. You Miao didn't sit for long before a great number of students outside the courtyard gathered, craning their necks and looking. They were all obviously thinking, *Wow, this guy's got connections*.

There were shouts from the imperial guards outside the enclosure wall moments later, driving the students off. Tang Hui ordered soldiers to stand guard outside the courtyard as one man entered and stopped to gaze at You Miao.

It was Zhao Chao.

[Chapter 23]

It had been three years since they parted at Yanbian. Now that they were reunited again in the capital, thousands of words and millions of mixed emotions swirled in You Miao, but he couldn't find the words to say them. He slowly rose to his feet, his heart pounding. He had imagined countless times how he and Zhao Chao would meet again, but never had he thought that it'd be in a place like this.

Zhao Chao was dressed in long black robes, without any accessories. His skin was tanned and much darker than before. He had also lost weight, and looked unbearably anguished. There was a deep furrow between his brows, and his eyes glinted dangerously, deadly as a vulture eyeing its prey.

"Zhao… Your Highness," You Miao greeted him.

"Sit down," Zhao Chao said. "Why the formality?"

The rims of You Miao's eyes grew hot. Over the last three years, they had exchanged over a dozen letters between them. When Zhao Chao first wrote to him, he'd call You Miao "You Miao-xiandi." Later, it became "xiandi." And then in the end, "xiandi" was thrown out and he simply called him "di." When You Miao responded, he had also addressed Zhao Chao as "xiong." The back and forth between them had always been very natural.

But now that they were face to face, suddenly, You Miao found words failing him.

It was as though this wasn't the Zhao Chao he once knew. Back then, Zhao Chao had been fair of skin, sharp-browed, and bright-eyed. Dressed in leather armor, he exuded an unconcealable air of valiance and spoke with a tone of dauntless righteousness. Now, he was much thinner and his skin much darker. You Miao was having a hard time connecting the youth in his memories who had stayed with him in that small, dark shack with the man standing before him now.

"Got tea?" Zhao Chao asked. "I don't drink green tea, though."

"Yes," You Miao replied. "Riverwave Oolong."

Zhao Chao quirked his lips, and he turned to Li Zhifeng with an unbridled smirk. "I remember you."

LI Zhifeng answered darkly, "I remember you, too."

You Miao whispered to him, "Call him 'Your Highness.'"

Zhao Chao snorted and waved dismissively. "It's fine." Then, he sat down with the sweeping movement of a military man.

You Miao suddenly sensed that Li Zhifeng seemed to hold some sort of animosity toward Zhao Chao. He looked at Li Zhifeng, then at Zhao Chao—but Zhao Chao was only focused on the tea leaves swirling inside his cup, looking thoughtful.

"Is this the Beauty's Kiss your little uncle grew?" he abruptly asked.

You Miao smiled. "Yeah."

"How's the estate doing?"

"All right, I guess," You Miao replied. "Makes a couple of thousand silver a year, enough to feed myself with leftovers."

"A lot of leftovers. My salary is only two hundred silver a year," Zhao Chao said.

You Miao laughed. "How much do you need? Just come to me if you're running out."

"We'll see," Zhao Chao said disinterestedly.

You Miao raised a cup with both hands and placed it in Zhao Chao's hand. When their fingers touched, You Miao's heart started to race, and an indescribable feeling began to sprout within him.

Zhao Chao, however, didn't appear to be moved, and only briefly wet his lips with the tea. "I heard you donated a hundred thousand pounds of grain last year, is that right?"

"Can't really call it a donation," You Miao said. "It was five coins a pound, so I made *something*. As long as it helped."

Zhao Chao snorted. "Don't be so stupid next time. A hundred thousand pounds of grain is only enough to feed my two hundred thousand men for half a day."

"Better than nothing, right?" You Miao felt dejected by his words, but still tried to force a smile. "I wasn't able to help you much, but I… Oh yeah, you…"

The two fell silent.

Zhao Chao flashed a smile. "Be honest with me. That year, when I summoned you to the palace to be my Study Companion, you scorned my lack of power and influence and declined the offer. Remember?"

You Miao felt a little guilty, but he didn't understand why Zhao Chao was bringing up this ancient history that had never before been spoken of between them. "I didn't scorn you. My uncle wouldn't let me, and before the year was over, my dad called me home…"

The whole time he spoke, Zhao Chao only stared at You Miao. Like a thuggish soldier, he pinched the tip of his teacup and knocked it around, toying with it. “That Lantern Festival…you didn’t even know me then.”

“Yeah,” You Miao agreed. “Right.”

Zhao Chao asked, “If we could go back in time and return to that Lantern Festival three years ago, if you knew me and I summoned you to my side—would you have come? Think carefully before you answer me.”

You Miao laughed. It was the laughter of a young man, one that seemed to brighten the whole world.

“Do you even need to ask?” You Miao teased. “No.”

Zhao Chao’s face darkened.

However, You Miao ignored him and pulled the cup out of Zhao Chao’s hand, gently placing it back on the table properly before filling it with tea once more. He raised the filled cup with both hands and put it back into Zhao Chao’s hand.

Then he said, completely serious, “Had I known that you’re such a good person, of course I’d have come.”

“Ah. I didn’t pamper you for nothing, then.” Zhao Chao took a casual sip, then splashed out the rest of the cup to the side.

“So? Who became your Study Companion in the end?” You Miao asked.

“No one. No one else caught my eye,” Zhao Chao said. “Autumn that year, after I returned from Yanbian, Father made me pick a house in which to live in the capital, outside the palace. He had arranged a marriage for me, with plans for the wedding to take place after autumn. But you know what happened when spring came. We started fighting with Goryeo, so I went out on the expedition. When I returned last year, the Xiong Family’s young lady had already fallen ill, then *poof*.”

“Death is a natural event, my condolences. When my mom passed, I also—”

“I never even saw the face of my bride, there’s nothing to mourn,” Zhao Chao said derisively. “Besides, when my troops died, they died in the hundreds of thousands. Have I not seen a dead person before? Only you scholars make a big deal out of it.”

You Miao couldn’t help but find this funny, but felt sad at the same time.

Zhao Chao continued, “Government reparation for the bereaved hasn’t even been issued yet; they’ve been dragging their feet for almost half a year now. Widows and orphans are crying outside the Military Affairs Camp every day. They even kowtow outside my front doors. What a pain.”

“Find a way to hurry things along?” You Miao suggested. “I’m gonna be drinking with Ping Xi and the others in a few days. I can ask about it.”

“Ping Xi can’t do anything, either,” Zhao Chao said. “The government doesn’t have any more money. With a hundred thousand people, if everyone got two silver, that’d already be two hundred thousand silver. We just lost territories at the beginning of the year and paid a hundred thousand silver. Even if I hurried them along, it’d be pointless—don’t you think?”

“Mn.” You Miao nodded slowly in understanding. “What will you do then, gege?”

Zhao Chao thought about it and replied, “Nothing, really. I just wanna leave here for a bit; maybe go to Jiangnan. Everyone hates me in the capital, anyway. How about this? Why don’t you forget about the exams and pack up? In a few days, I’ll submit a memorial requesting to be positioned with the Military Administrative Affairs of Jiao Prefecture. Come with me. Don’t meet with my brother, lest he brings me trouble. Let’s travel to the South and play for a few years. I’m tired. Old. I don’t want to live in the capital anymore.”

“I will welcome you at Riverwave Estate any time you want to visit, but my teacher told me to take the exams if I could. Why don’t I…think of a way to get transferred to territorial administration[37] and we go back to Liu Prefecture together?”

“Actually, I’m missing an in-house counselor. If I ask my father for you, would you be willing to come?”

You Miao frowned slightly. “My teacher told me to write the exams… How about this—”

“If you achieve Zhuangyuan and get onto the Golden Billboard, then you’ll be a pillar of the nation and I won’t be able to ask for you anymore. Eh, xiandi?” Zhao Chao said.

You Miao burst out laughing, highly amused. “That’s impossible. It’ll already be good if I could manage a Jinshi.”

“Jinshi is also a phoenix out of reach,” Zhao Chao said. “As if gege is thick-skinned enough to ask his brother for you. Stop dancing around the answer and give me a sure word—are you willing to follow me, or are you going to take the exams?”

You Miao’s heart sank, but Zhao Chao only grinned broadly at him, gesturing him to answer.

However, You Miao couldn’t answer his question at all. He’d studied in Liu Prefecture for three years and learned so much from Sun Yu… To throw all of that away in order to follow Zhao Chao to the Department of Military Defense of Jiao Prefecture to be an army counselor… One side was Zhao Chao, and the other was the duty Sun Yu had bestowed on him. Was there no way to compromise?

“I… Let me think about it,” You Miao said.

Zhao Chao snorted. “Forget it, do as you like. I know the temperament of you scholars.”

“You brought this up so suddenly, I wasn’t prepared at all. Just let me think on it…” You Miao said. “My heart recognizes the friendship you’ve shown me, and never in the past few years have I forgotten. I still have what you gave me. It’s kept at home—”

“Oh?” Zhao Chao stood up. “What did I give you? Are you talking about the cargo of goods?”

“No.” You Miao laughed.

The rays of the sun beamed down on them as they stood in the corridor. The light was warm and kind as it draped over the young men. They had grown up. Zhao Chao was almost the same height as Li Zhifeng now, and when he stood in front of You Miao, he radiated power and authority.

Fear poked its head out of nowhere inside You Miao. Zhao Chao’s eyes were as searing as a torch, as if he had seen through what You Miao was thinking deep down.

“I’m off,” he said.

“Wait!” You Miao exclaimed.

You Miao ran back into his room to retrieve something, and Zhao Chao stopped in the yard to wait for him. When You Miao returned, he handed him an envelope.

“Take this first. I’ll come to talk to you at your residence in a few days.”

Zhao Chao looked at You Miao, his eyes distant, and ripped open the envelope in front of You Miao’s face. His fingers found two pieces of paper inside and pulled them out. They were two money bills worth five hundred silver; a thousand silver total.

You Miao inwardly groaned that he’d done something stupid. He hadn’t expected Zhao Chao to open it right in front of him. Didn’t this gesture only show that You Miao thought he was here to shamelessly beg for money? But because of their relationship, he figured the other wouldn’t think of it that way.

Zhao Chao, meanwhile, only quietly watched him. You Miao couldn’t quite figure him out anymore. He finally realized that the Zhao Chao he had known, the one in the letters, wasn’t the same Zhao Chao before him now.

“Everyone else looks down on me.” Zhao Chao held up that envelope, his hand trembling and his whole body shaking with anger. He hissed darkly at You Miao, “You look down on me too, don’t you?”

“I didn’t mean it like that…” You Miao hastily tried to explain, but a heavy punch landed on his face and he fell to the ground with a cry.

Li Zhifeng was in the corridor cleaning teacups, and he hadn’t expected Zhao Chao to actually raise a hand without warning. He sensed the attack as soon as Zhao Chao threw the punch at You Miao’s eye. He hurled out a cup, but he was too late and missed disrupting the attack by a hair’s breadth!

The teacup shattered against Zhao Chao’s face, eliciting an angry roar from him. Still, Li Zhifeng continuously hurled tea saucers and teacups at him. When everything had been thrown, Li Zhifeng himself leaped out of the corridor and tackled Zhao Chao like a crazed tiger.

“I’ll kill you—!” Li Zhifeng roared angrily, as his fist smashed Zhao Chao squarely in the face.

Zhao Chao didn’t even have the time to grunt before he was sent flying from the impact, crashing head-first into the wall with a huge noise. The soldiers standing guard outside were all horrified, and Tang Hui rushed in with the guards. It was complete mayhem.

You Miao’s head was buzzing, and he was seeing stars thanks to Zhao Chao’s punch. The eye that Zhao Chao had socked was starting to swell,

and it felt like his eyeball was being squeezed into his brain. He was feeling around his own face when he heard Tang Hui yell, "*Kneel*!"

Li Zhifeng panted and caught his breath, then with one swift movement, he rushed forward with another fist ready to swing. He jerked away from the approaching Tang Hui and shoulder-checked him hard with his body; the forceful impact sent Tang Hui flying, too. Seeing things going south, You Miao immediately ran over to hug Li Zhifeng around the waist.

"Don't be mad! Calm down! It's fine!" he cried.

Zhao Chao's face was smeared with the blood that poured from his nose, and his eye socket had been cracked. He leaned against the wall and retched, throwing up all the tea and breakfast he had in his stomach before crashing back to the ground. By then, the rest of the soldiers had their nocked arrows pointing at Li Zhifeng—as soon as Tang Hui gave the order, they would shoot him through the heart.

"Don't shoot! Don't shoot!" You Miao exclaimed.

You Miao ran over to pull Zhao Chao up. It was with great difficulty that Zhao Chao managed to stand on his feet—but then he shoved You Miao away.

"We're leaving."

Zhao Chao shot Li Zhifeng a hateful glare. He staggered, but with the assistance of a couple of imperial guards, they left the yard. Li Zhifeng was still panting, but his blazing fury was finally subsiding.

You Miao stared, shaken, at Zhao Chao's retreating back. All along the way, there were a great number of students stealing glimpses as the Third Prince left the Imperial College, beaten to a sorry state and covered in tea and puke.

Once Zhao Chao was gone, Li Zhifeng turned around and stood in front of You Miao, bending down to check the eye Zhao Chao had punched. It was already bruising massively, and Li Zhifeng gently massaged around the pressure point on You Miao's nose ridge.

"Go get the cream for physical injuries," he told Zhang Wenhan.

Zhang Wenhan and Zheng Yong were already outside of the room, having been alerted by the commotion. A number of students had witnessed the incident that had just transpired, and they whispered to each other in awe. Zhang Wenhan retrieved the medicinal cream and closed the front gates of the courtyard while Li Zhifeng applied it to You Miao's face.

You Miao sat there, disoriented, and only blearily heard Li Zhifeng's voice ringing next to his ears.

"I didn't think he'd have the heart to hit you," Li Zhifeng said, blaming himself. "Does it still hurt?"

Tears welled up and rolled in You Miao's eyes.

"It hurts? I'll be gentler…" Li Zhifeng said.

You Miao abruptly reached out and wrapped his arms around Li Zhifeng's neck. Anguish surged and overwhelmed him, and he burst into tears as a range of emotions devoured him entirely. He cried and cried and cried until he wanted to throw up. Li Zhifeng held him, quietly, until You Miao exhausted himself from crying. He then swept You Miao up and brought him back into the room to lay him down in bed.

Wrapped in his blanket, You Miao's thoughts drifted from himself to Zhao Chao and he felt nothing but misery. His head throbbed the entire afternoon as the pain pulsated. It felt as though he had dozed off, and when he gained consciousness again, it was to the voices of the Juren who had gone out for the day. A massive headache struck You Miao and he snapped open his eyes. Li Zhifeng was sitting by his bedside, watching over him.

"Want to eat something? Li Zhifeng asked. "I'll have Zhang Wenhan go buy some food."

You Miao replied listlessly, "No, you and Wenhan can go ahead."

Li Zhifeng fell silent. At dusk, he got up and left. When he returned, he brought with him a bit of plain congee and placed it on the table inside the room before stripping off his outer robe and climbing into bed with You Miao.

One of You Miao's eye sockets was completely swollen, so when You Miao squinted open his eyes, only a small slit could be seen from under that heavy eyelid. He faced the wall, remembering that stormy blizzard night.

"*Those who know me understand my anguish… Those who know me not, wonder what I seek…*" You Miao's voice was raspy as he murmured the song.

* * *

It was the second watch. Everything was peaceful and quiet in the yard, and the moon was frigid as water.

"I'm hungry," You Miao said.

Li Zhifeng got out of bed to retrieve the congee. The food box carried small appetizer dishes inside as well, and Li Zhifeng placed the bowl of plain congee over the brazier to heat up. You Miao rolled out of bed in a daze and sprawled on the table as he watched Li Zhifeng's back.

The sweet aroma of rice began to permeate the air, which cheered You Miao up some as he pulled the single-use chopsticks apart. All of a sudden, Li Zhifeng seemed to sense something. He stood up just as a soft knock came from the lattice window.

"Who is it?" You Miao asked.

"It's me," Zhao Chao said.

Taken aback, You Miao quickly stood up to open the door, and Zhao Chao came in.

When he entered, he looked at Li Zhifeng and said in a low voice, "You… What a hard punch."

"What do you want?" Li Zhifeng demanded.

"He's not here to fight," You Miao said. "Li Zhifeng, help me go over there and guard the door. Don't let anyone in."

Li Zhifeng was still a little worried, but You Miao reassured him. "Don't worry. Listen to me."

And so, Li Zhifeng left the bedroom to sit in front of the screen in the outer room. He'd look over every so often to keep an eye on Zhao Chao.

As it turned out, everything that had transpired during the day had been an act. You Miao didn't know whether to laugh or cry when he learned this. Zhao Chao gestured for him to sit down, so You Miao sat. Zhao Chao's left eye was horribly bruised by Li Zhifeng's punch, and medicinal powder had been applied to the corner. You Miao mirrored his look, as it was his right eye that was bruised and swelling from Zhao Chao's punch, with medicinal cream applied.

The two stared at each other, neither speaking. But at that moment, You Miao understood everything.

After a while, Zhao Chao let out a deep sigh. He pulled You Miao's hands over and buried his face in them, nuzzling. You Miao felt miserable, as if a knife was cutting into his heart.

"Gege lost the war." Zhao Chao whimpered. "A hundred thousand soldiers' lives—all gone. I killed a hundred thousand people… A hundred thousand lives… I have no face to face their families…"

His voice was filled with suppressed anger and pain, like a despairing tiger cub. Tears welled in You Miao's eyes, and he pulled Zhao Chao into a hug, patting his back soothingly. It was a long time before Zhao Chao finally calmed down.

You Miao asked him, "What powder did you apply?"

"Something from the army for physical injuries," Zhao Chao replied. "That was a good punch, Li Zhifeng. I wanted to put on an act this morning, and it was a good thing I didn't give you guys a heads-up. We did good; now the entire Directorate of Education knows. By tomorrow, that band of bitches in the Chancellor's Residence and the six ministries will know too."

"You were acting," Li Zhifeng stated accusatorily.

Zhao Chao replied with a pleased, "Uh-huh."

Li Zhifeng turned his head to shoot him a look, then turned back and ignored him completely afterward, leaning against the door to watch the moon above the yard.

You Miao rummaged out his medicinal cream and offered, "Here, use mine."

Zhao Chao stood up and grabbed a towel to wipe away what he had on previously, and You Miao applied the cream he had offered around Zhao Chao's eye before handing it to him.

"Your head smashed against the wall today. Does it still hurt?"

Zhao Chao tucked the cream away and replied, "I napped for a bit in the afternoon and asked the physician to prescribe something, so I'm better. Have you eaten? I brought some food for you. Li Zhifeng, come and join us."

Li Zhifeng didn't respond, but gave You Miao a look.

"Leave half of it for him. Let's dig in first, I'm starving. My head's been aching the entire afternoon," You Miao said.

Zhao Chao patted him on the head. "Are you all right? I hope you're not angry with me."

You Miao griped irritably, "Of course I was angry; I was wondering why you changed all of a sudden…"

Zhao Chao laughed. You Miao sighed and poured half of his congee into Zhao Chao's bowl to share. Zhao Chao washed his hands and ripped the steamed chicken he brought in half, wrapping half of it with grease

paper to keep for Li Zhifeng. The other half was further pulled into pieces for You Miao to dip into the congee.

"So what are your plans?" You Miao asked.

"I gotta get out before Zhao Zhuo ascends the throne," Zhao Chao said. "Or else I'll have nothing left but to wait for him to screw me over. I don't want to drag you down with me. The act today was because I worry that Li Yan is suspicious of you. But now, you can openly and ostentatiously accept his invitation. At first, I was afraid my act wasn't enough, but after getting beaten up by Li Zhifeng, no one will doubt we've fallen out. By the way, do you think you can achieve Zhuangyuan?"

You Miao gave a wry smile. "Are you trying to kill me with pressure?"

"Your letters to me were all well-composed," Zhao Chao said. "Your teacher is Sun Yu, eh. My father banished him back then, but keeps talking about him all the time in the inner palace. But he cares too stubbornly about face, and refuses to summon him back to the capital…"

"I know my teacher came from quite an impressive background, but what does that have to do with me?" You Miao said.

"How does it have nothing to do with you?" Zhao Chao countered. "When my father sees your essay, he'll ask who taught you, and if you say Sun Yu, he'll probably care more. Sun Yu used to be the Political Advisor. Father wants to make things up with him."

You Miao nodded, worry coloring his brows. "I also think I'll be able to pass the Metropolitan Exam, but the Palace Exam might be a little out of reach."

"The Metropolitan Exam doesn't matter. Even if you don't pass it, you'll stay in the capital," Zhao Chao said. "The Grace Exams are this year, so I knew you'd be coming to the capital. I've planned everything out for you. You just listen, and keep it to yourself."

Zhao Chao dropped his voice to a near whisper and said, very seriously, "We brothers, we have nothing. No support or backing whatsoever. I'm counting on you for everything."

"You're making me super nervous like this…" You Miao said.

"Don't be scared," Zhao Chao said. "I'm counting on you to cozy up to Li Yan. If you can't get through to him and his group, we won't be able to move a single inch at court."

“I was thinking that too,” You Miao said. “But what position should I go for? Would Li Yan let me?”

“Just obey him,” Zhao Chao said. “He knows we’ve fallen out. You’re Sun Yu’s student, you’ll be able to gain favor with my father, so Li Yan will be all over you. But you can’t follow Zhao Zhuo, or else you’d be competing with Li Yan for favor—you get me?”

You Miao nodded slowly.

Zhao Chao continued, “If my father appoints you to be Zhao Zhuo’s personal attendant, absolutely do not agree under any circumstances. If you agree to it, you’ll be in trouble—you’ll have no power, no influence, and you’ll be forced to face down Li Yan prematurely.”

You Miao’s headache was starting to return. “What, am I supposed to ignore your dad and your brother if I catch their eye?”

“Just don’t talk,” Zhao Chao replied. “Right now, my father only cares about chasing immortality. If Zhao Zhuo sees that you’re stubborn, he won’t force you.”

“And then?” You Miao asked.

“And then… One step at a time, I guess,” Zhao Chao said. “I haven’t thought about what comes after. If Li Yan sees that you don’t agree to the personal attendant position, he’ll try to pull you to his side, so you can just follow him. If there are any new plans, I’ll come find you in secret. Let’s think of a way to get Nie Dan back first. Everything is much easier to negotiate when he’s around. I was too conceited, thinking that the war with Goryeo was a certain victory. Who knew I’d fall into their trap? Li Yan bought the favor of the Ministry of Revenue, and so many people died because of them…”

“The Crown Prince doesn’t care if Nie Dan sides with you?” You Miao wondered.

“He can’t,” Zhao Chao answered. “Right now, there aren’t many who’d dare provoke Nie Dan. All they can do is oppress him with rank, but we all depend on him to defend the northern border.”

Dread and fear sprouted in You Miao’s mind, and he asked in a hushed voice, “What are you trying to do? You’re not thinking of…”

The two stared at each other in silence. Then, Zhao Chao knocked You Miao on the head and said, “Are you an idiot? Even if I want to take Zhao Zhuo down and become the Emperor myself, would Nie Dan agree to it?

That guy is loyal to the throne to a fault. Protecting me is one thing; he would never touch even a finger of Zhao Zhuo's."

When You Miao thought about it, he realized it was true. Zhao Chao said dejectedly, "The most I'll get in this life is princedom. My priority is to protect my own life. Zhao Zhuo only wants to keep me under his watch so he can toy with me as he wills. Who knows if one day he'll get tired of it and grant me a glass of poisoned wine to end everything. I gotta get out of the capital before that happens; everything will be easier once I'm out. Maybe I'll join you in Liu Prefecture then, and farm the fields with you."

And here You Miao had thought Zhao Chao's departure for Jiao Prefecture was already a done deal. He hadn't realized the situation was this precarious.

"Didn't you say you were going to Jiao Prefecture?"

"Jiao Prefecture? Jiao Prefecture, my ass—more like going to hell," Zhao Chao said. "Nie Dan was immediately transferred to Yanbian after submitting only one memorial to plead my case. The court officials have all swung in the Li faction's favor, and those who want to protect themselves don't dare say a word. As if Zhao Zhuo would actually let the Ministry of War approve my papers."

You Miao nodded. "I get it now. Figure out a way to let you leave the capital and become a vassal king."

"Very good, you finally understand," Zhao Chao said.

You Miao laughed out loud. The pair of brothers in adversity, each with a bruised eye, laughed until their sides were in stitches.

"Eat," Zhao Chao urged a moment later.

After the two finished the congee and the half chicken, You Miao boiled water to brew tea for Zhao Chao.

"You've been on my mind for three years. And now I can finally have you brew a pot of tea for me," Zhao Chao said.

You Miao grinned in response. "Didn't I just treat you to tea this morning?"

Zhao Chao replied, "The tea this morning was bitter, so much so that it made my heart sick… I wanted to punch you… Why are you so good, thinking of me in every way, agreeing with my every word, calling me 'ge'? And all I was doing was trying to think of ways to punch you. I'm a goddamn beast. I can't believe I actually hit you…"

You Miao laughed again, the hand pouring tea shaking.

Zhao Chao picked up the cup and stared at it quietly for a moment. Then he mumbled, “I didn’t help you much when you went to Jiangnan… I felt so bad that I lost sleep over it…”

“You helped me big time,” You Miao said. “The water canals were dug by the people Tang Hui sent, and later you even got me thousands of tenants. I was able to pull through during that period because of you. And you wrote me letters, too…”

Zhao Chao let out another sigh. You Miao took the cup in his hand away, heated it up, then poured tea into it, the clearness of it mirroring their reflections.

“*Upon my leaving, wept the willow… Upon my return… Those who know me understand my anguish…*” Zhao Chao gazed at You Miao, his faintly cracked voice low as he sang, “*Those who know me not, wonder what I seek…*”

You Miao lowered his head, tipped the teapot, and the fragrance of tea filled the air. Zhao Chao gazed at You Miao’s face, then he reached out and brushed his palm against his brows.

“Xiandi, what’s your courtesy name again?” Zhao Chao asked.

“You Ziqian,” You Miao replied.

“You Ziqian, you’ve become more handsome than before,” Zhao Chao said.

You Miao raised his eyes. He then pulled Zhao Chao’s hand down with hooked fingers, laying it open, and placed a teacup in his palm. “And you’ve gotten thinner.”

“The war left scars all over my body. They’ll terrify you if I show you them,” Zhao Chao said. You Miao was amused, and Zhao Chao brought the cup to his lips as he said, “If I manage to survive in the future, I will definitely not mistreat you, didi.”

You Miao sighed. “Don’t say that. I know how you treat me.”

“And I know how you treat *me*,” Zhao Chao said. He threw back the tea and rose to his feet. “I’m off.”

“I’ll see you off,” You Miao said.

“Don’t,” Zhao Chao replied. “I’ll find a way to come see you again.”

But just as he was about to exit the door, he turned back around.

“Lend me some money, I’m all out.”

Amused, You Miao went to count the bills, but Zhao Chao piped up from behind him, “Proper silver, don’t use the bills.”

“Are the Crown Prince’s ears and eyes that sharp?” You Miao frowned. “How much do you want?”

“Hard to say,” Zhao Chao replied. “How about two hundred?”

You Miao opened the money chest and counted out taels for him. “Your salary is two hundred silver, but it’s not enough? The annual expense of all the room and board at Shen Garden is only about eighty silver.”

“All my salary is spent aiding the bereaved families of my dead soldiers,” Zhao Chao explained.

You Miao used a metal ruler to count, lining out the taels of silver five at a time. When he heard Zhao Chao, he added more to the pile. “I’ll give you three hundred. When you run out, just send me a message. Grab a cloth by the corner of the wall to cover this up. Try not to get robbed on the way home, yeah? Think you can lift this?”

Zhao Chao smiled wryly. “Gege found himself a big-time wealthy patron today,” he said as he took the silver. The whole thing weighed at least twenty pounds, and the load sank heavily on his shoulder as he lifted it and left.

It was as if the pent-up gloom in You Miao’s chest had cleared. After the fight and falling out earlier today, there was a flash of a second where You Miao found everything dull, as if his heart had been voided.

After all, all of the hard work he put into studying in the last few years was so he could help Zhao Chao. Perhaps You Miao had recognized him as his lord a long time ago, and to have run into such a change since coming to the capital was akin to utterly crushing the hopes and anticipation he had had for the future. It was both disheartening and heartbreaking. Now that he had discovered that Zhao Chao was still the same Zhao Chao, it re-ignited his will to fight—even when the current situation didn’t allow for optimism.

You Miao glanced at Li Zhifeng and saw that he was looking at him with something unreadable in his eyes.

“Feeling better?” Li Zhifeng asked.

“Let’s go to bed.” You Miao huffed a breath, now much more at ease.

His thoughts suddenly drifted to Li Zhifeng, comparing him to himself. Maybe Li Zhifeng held the same sentiment he did, following him all this time.

In the dark of the night, LI Zhifeng suddenly asked, “You trust him?”

You Miao turned his head over, pondering the question, and replied, “Do you think he’s acting?”

“This morning, he was,” Li Zhifeng pointed out.

“I believe what Zhao Chao said earlier is true,” You Miao said. “If he had to put on an act in front of me, then he might never find anyone he could speak the truth to again.”

“Mn.”

The next day, You Miao went out to breakfast with that blackened eye, greeting the other Juren with a smile like nothing was the matter, and no one dared to ask him about it. Since there was nothing to do during the day, he spent it studying in the library.

Changyuan and Shaowei had finished shopping in the capital, so they drove a full carriage of goods back to Jiangnan and delivered mail to Qiao Jue while they were at it. One of them drove while the other escorted the goods, leaving Li Zhifeng the only one left to wait on You Miao in the capital.

Three days later, it was the fifteenth of the fourth month. You Miao changed into a fine set of clothing and instructed Li Zhifeng to bring a case of tea as they headed out to attend the party. You Miao was still a little nervous about meeting Li Yan again, but he was more confident now than he was before. At least now he knew what he should say, and what he should do.

[Chapter 24]

The pair of master and servant rode in the carriage down Tianlong Street, crossing through the west market, before they came to Qinghe Lodge. Qinghe Lodge was an establishment where dignitaries and the affluent partied. Built in the northwest of the city, it drew spring water from Mount Xi. As the moon surfaced, the song sung by the leading lady of a play resounded through the air of the clear and deep night. It made for a charming atmosphere.

When You Miao entered with his invite, the young lords inside the courtyard were laughing boisterously, rowdy and joking around.

An announcement at the front gates sounded, "Presenting Young Master You—!"

And the entire yard fell silent.

You Miao walked in through the arched entrance and showed his face—it was still the same appearance, one of a glowing and happy youth. He cupped his hands and greeted the crowd, smiling.

"I'm back."

And the yard erupted in resounding laughter. Li Yan snorted and spat his wine while Ping Xi slapped his own thigh and fell out of his chair. The other rich boys all had their own hilarious reactions as they pointed at You Miao and howled their mirth.

You Miao was also incredibly amused, shaking his head and looking as shameless and cheeky as he had in the past. Li Yan waved him over, but when You Miao did so, Li Yan gave him a kick.

"You bugger! Ha ha ha ha ha!" Li Yan was convulsing with mirth in his seat, and he pulled You Miao into his arms, rubbing and squishing him. "Why do you look like that?!"

When You Miao only responded with a sigh, Li Yan prompted, "Who hit you? Tell us. Gege will get back at them for you."

The young lords were all smiling, but no one spoke and only watched You Miao.

You Miao shook his head with a wry smile. "Don't worry about it."

"Three shots as punishment, three shots!" Ping Xi placed the wine cup in front of You Miao.

"No complaints there," You Miao said amicably.

You Miao picked up the wine cup and quickly threw back three shots, and the heated social scene returned to the feast. The party today was held in honor of You Miao's return, so the conversation didn't stray from him very much. First, they asked after his estate in Jiangnan, then they asked about You Miao's Jieyuan title. You Miao told them sheepishly that the title was one his dad had bought. The crowd didn't look surprised at all.

Li Yan asked, "Got a teacher?"

"Yeah." You Miao didn't dare play the fool in this matter, since the truth would've come out sooner or later. He replied honestly, "His name is Sun Yu."

Li Yan looked thoughtful, and someone else asked, "The Political Advisor?"

You Miao replied laughingly, "Let's not talk about it! That old fart isn't nice at all. He had me kneel in punishment and whips me, boohoo—!"

Li Yan draped his arm over You Miao's shoulders and teased, "Come, you're in the capital now. Your brothers have got your back!"

The entire hall erupted into laughter again, and they conversed as if they had returned to the beautiful times of their youth. You Miao was still that same cheeky kid, and after downing a number of shots, he knocked cups and clapped bowls to imitate his dad, giving the audience a vivid re-enactment and making everyone howl.

"The crabs at my place are thiiiiiis big," You Miao said with a wide gesture. "When autumn comes, I'll tell my little uncle to have them delivered and treat you all to a good meal."

"It's been rough for you, huh?" Qin Shaonan said.

"Nah, it's like tending a garden," You Miao replied. "It just happens gradually."

That might have been the case, but the hardship and pain he'd gone through was known only to himself.

Sima Huang cut in, "Had we known it's that much fun, we bros would've gone to raise ourselves a garden, too."

"Ain't what's mine yours?" You Miao laughed. "You can have the hill that grows mulberries, Li Yan can have the vegetable fields behind Shen Garden… Come, come, come, let's put this on ink and paper."

"Aww, yeah!" Ping Xi immediately said, "Someone bring the ink and brush!"

You Miao laughed as he drew a map on the paper, marking the perimeters of the fields. “Pick wherever you want!”

A number of people immediately crowded over, and Ping Xi joked, “You can take care of the land for us when we’re not there.”

Li Yan put a hand on You Miao’s shoulder and circled all of Shen Garden, including the field in the back. “This piece is mine now, Miao-zi. Remember this, eh.”

“Sure,” You Miao said with a chuckle. “If you have the time to swing by and stay forever, then this garden is all yours!”

The crowd jumped in and divvied up all of You Miao’s estate. You Miao asked for another pile of papers to half-jokingly write land deeds to give to the guys. The young lords then started to excitedly discuss how to work the fields, rolling up their pants and sleeves to plant rice seedlings; taking it for something new and fascinating. They were talking as if Riverwave Estate was now their own, and everyone agreed that after the Palace Exam was over, they would travel in full fanfare down to Jiangnan with You Miao and spend a few months at his place.

You Miao readily agreed to all of this and told them what fun activities there were at the estate. It had been three years since he was at the capital, and You Miao drank until he was completely sloshed.

Toward the end, the wastrels all ditched their hats and removed their boots, swaying about and falling all over themselves, wobbly and insane. When Li Yan really got into it, he even crawled under the table, pretending to be a ghost. The establishment was full of the sons of Tianqi’s highest-ranking officials, but one would think they were all madmen.

They partied until deep into the night, and at second watch, when they were all exhausted from the fun, their respective bodyguards came and carried them to their individual carriages. You Miao was sorely drunk and leaning against Li Yan, waving a wad of money bills.

“Take the money before you leave! I, the young master, grant you—!”

The sloshed You Miao fussed, distributing all two hundred bills he had in his possession, but the case of tea Li Zhifeng had brought went untouched.

“Let’s go,” Li Yan said. “I’ll take you home. Quanrong slave, go out front and drive for me for once.”

Li Zhifeng climbed into the driver's seat without speaking a word. Li Yan carried You Miao into his proper carriage, while the carriage from the Chancellor's Residence trailed immediately behind at an unhurried pace.

The capital was incredibly quiet at night; there were only the two horse carriages clacking along the street. The patrol approached and stopped them.

"Curfew is in effect! Who goes there?"

The butler from the second carriage flashed the identity badge, and the soldiers quickly bowed and moved aside to give way.

As the coach rocked along the road, the glass lamp that hung above spun and reflected a plethora of colors onto You Miao's face.

"Drank too much?" Li Yan asked. "I've never seen you drunk before."

You Miao groaned, leaning limply in Li Yan's arms. Li Yan slapped his face.

"Faker. Keep that up, I dare you."

You Miao felt the pain and had to get up. He looked at Li Yan with a happy grin, swaying back and forth along with the moving carriage. Li Yan squished his chin.

"What were you thinking? Got beaten up by Zhao Chao, did you? Know how good your gege is now?"

You Miao's face dropped a little, and Li Yan added, "I've long since known that you're like this—holding all your secrets close and never telling any of them."

"I was wrong. I was wrong, all right?" You Miao whined.

Li Yan finally laughed. He humphed, propping his feet up on the seat across. "Massage my shoulders," he ordered.

You Miao gave Li Yan a brief shoulder rub. Then he said, "Here. This tea is for you."

"Brew some tea, it'll help with the wine," Li Yan said.

Thus, You Miao called out, "Li Zhifeng, stop on the bridge. We're gonna chat for a moment."

The horse carriage stopped at the center of the bridge. Big, red lanterns lined each side. When You Miao peeled aside the coach curtains, the night breeze of the late spring blew past and dispersed his drunkenness, making him feel better. He started up the small heater inside the coach, drinking tea with Li Yan.

“Be honest with me,” Li Yan said. “What are you planning, if you intend to run over to Zhao Chao’s side again?”

You Miao laughed, amused. “I won’t get friendly with him again.” He picked up a cup and absently passed Li Yan the tea, not sparing him a look. “I’ve seen through him now.”

“Good that you have,” Li Yan said. “I know you; you’ve got plenty of shrewish, clever ideas in your head. The bros will back you, but if you sell us out, don’t blame me for having no mercy.”

You Miao laughed. “I wouldn’t dare. My teacher made me come to the capital to earn a title, but I still want to go home after the exams. Why don’t you find me a post in the territories and let me go back to Liu Prefecture?”

Li Yan clicked his tongue. “You good-for-nothing! Is that how you’ll spend the rest of your life?”

Still amused, You Miao lamented, “Then what do you want me to do?”

Li Yan said, “I’ve heard my dad talk about this Sun Yu. Just wait until the seventh month and take the Metropolitan Exam. I’ll naturally take care of things for you after that.”

“And then?” You Miao pressed.

“And then you follow me to go see His Majesty,” Li Yan replied.

“You’re taking the exams too?”

Li Yan gave him a weird look. “Of course.”

You Miao nodded, and Li Yan continued, “Just follow what I say, and it’ll be fine. Over the next few months, keep your head down and don’t cause trouble. Come when you’re called, but go out through the back door.”

“Fine.” You Miao chuckled.

Li Yan became pensive, and You Miao nudged him.

“What are you thinking about?”

Li Yan glanced at You Miao, and then put back the cup in his hand. “You don’t understand. There’s a lot going on in the capital; one slip-up can cost you your entire family. Every single step needs to be calculated. Don’t you start any trouble for me at a time like this.”

You Miao didn’t quite understand, but he nodded slowly nonetheless. Li Yan added, poking You Miao hard on the forehead, “I had wanted you to stay home for a few more years, but since you’re here, then whatever. Don’t even think about trying to stand out, you hear?”

You Miao laughed, “It’s not like I’m a kid.”

Li Yan gave You Miao a long, hard look, then finally said, “Follow me and I promise you’ll have a good life. No matter what anyone else promises you, don’t listen to them.”

“Fine,” You Miao agreed. “If I hear anything, I’ll tell it all to you. Is that good enough?”

Li Yan stared at You Miao meaningfully, then quirked an eyebrow. He said derisively, “If you actually do that, then it’d save me a whole lotta trouble. Who knows what sundry little secrets you have hugged to your chest?”

You Miao’s mind stopped, his heart pounding.

“Isn’t it just the thing with Zhao Chao?” he said, sounding nonchalant. “Li Zhifeng already beat him to a pulp, what more do you want?”

“I won’t argue with you about the whole Zhao Chao thing,” Li Yan said. “But who knows what’ll happen in the future? I guess we’ll see. Gonna head home to cuddle the wife now. Quanrong slave, take good care of your little master. I’m gone!”

Li Yan alighted the carriage and went back to his own. The two vehicles parted ways, each heading toward their own destination.

On the way back from the party, You Miao’s mind churned nonstop. He thought about how Li Yan seemed to be sharper now; he’d known You Miao had been pretending to be inebriated. He was acting, too—everyone was acting. What did the conversation just now mean? Was he warning You Miao against banding up with Zhao Chao again?

No. Li Yan must have believed that he and Zhao Chao had fallen out, or else he wouldn’t have made the carriage stop and told You Miao all those things. Had he believed that You Miao had joined Zhao Chao’s camp, then considering his character, he would be plotting against him behind his back despite appearing friendly on the surface. So right now, everything was going smoothly.

The horse carriage stopped in the Imperial College’s back courtyard, and as You Miao climbed out, he sighed and turned to Li Zhifeng.

“I was only putting on an act for them,” he said.

“I know,” Li Zhifeng said.

When You Miao returned to his room to clean up, the map from earlier fell out. Seeing the estate so horribly divided, as if a dog had chewed it to

pieces, he felt indescribably disgusted. He shredded the paper and threw it out.

Instead of bumping shoulders with people like that all day, You Miao would rather go home and farm. Sun Yu had mentioned that the political scene was a hypocritical sham, and today, You Miao finally experienced it for himself.

When Li Zhifeng came into the room and closed the door behind him, he picked up one piece of the paper shreds on the ground and looked at it under the light.

You Miao said, "You can have that piece."

"I don't want the estate, I just want you," Li Zhifeng replied.

You Miao's laughter returned. He scooted over under the blanket, so Li Zhifeng climbed into bed and captured You Miao in his arms, dousing the light as he went. The two thus fell asleep holding each other.

Since that day, You Miao settled down and remained in the Imperial College to focus on his studies. The Directorate of Education's library was a place with more books than he had ever seen in his life: astronomy, astrology and divination, mathematics, and hundreds of schools of thought… There were so many books that the place was practically bursting. It would be impossible to read everything in one lifetime. As the weather gradually became hotter, You Miao thought the white robes the students wore looked good, so he got some made for himself. He went to the library every day to study, and in the evenings, he would kick shuttlecocks with the other Juren under the setting sun. Once in a while, when he was tired of studying, he would toss the book aside and go stroll the city with Li Zhifeng, buying some small items to eat or play with, thus passing his days in such carefreeness.

After living in the estate for three years and rarely frequenting cities in that time, his life had become simple. Now that he was back in the capital, he started to grow attached once again to this glamorous world.

* * *

Zhao Chao didn't come looking for him again—probably to avoid the eyes and ears of others. You Miao had no idea what he had planned. At the end of the sixth month, Li Yan held another party, but this time, it took place at Tingyu Pavilion.

You Miao arrived very early and waited at the entrance for Li Yan. Once Li Yan alighted the coach, he instructed You Miao to stay close behind him and to remain silent unless there was cause to speak—in short, to not stand out.

Not understanding what Li Yan had planned, You Miao very obediently followed him and entered Tingyu Pavilion. Another man in his twenties came in after them; while he was dressed in a long brown robe, it did nothing to conceal his noble air. The young lords all addressed him as "Zhao-gongzi," and that was when You Miao realized: this was the Crown Prince.

The Crown Prince's name was Zhao Zhuo. He had come to seek entertainment with Li Yan, but when he noticed You Miao, he made a few inquiries here and there, to which You Miao only stoically nodded. He wound up listening to an entire night of songs without having spoken many words.

In between the feasting, a few of the attendees started talking about the affairs of the South. It was Qin Shaonan who initiated the topic.

"I hear the Yangtze flooding this year is particularly vicious compared to the years before. I wonder how Yang Prefecture and its surrounding regions are doing?"

This immediately caught You Miao's attention. He asked carefully, "What do you mean? Is Jiangnan flooding?"

Jiangnan and Jiangbei flooded every year. You Miao recalled a year when he'd been little, when Pei County was swamped and the water encroached as far as the Tea-Horse Road. Thankfully, Sunshower Estate sat at a higher elevation, so it was never submerged. As for Riverwave Estate, although it was located next to the river and a part of the land was in the lower basin, it was nonetheless fortunate enough to sit on a hill. Half of Yang Prefecture would have to flood before the water level reached Shen Garden.

You Miao had planned to act casual as he inquired, but as soon as the question left his lips, Li Yan shot him a glare. He knew not to say any more.

Zhao Zhuo clinked glasses with the merry crowd, and You Miao did his best to stay hidden, ensuring Zhao Zhuo didn't notice him. Yet he was a little puzzled about the situation until during one of the drinking rounds, Zhao Zhuo pointed at him with a broad smile.

“You Miao?”

“Ziqian? The young master is calling you,” Li Yan said.

You Miao made a noise of affirmation, and Zhao Zhuo said, “Pour him some wine. Drink up.”

You Miao thus drank the wine, and then nodded.

Li Yan draped an arm around You Miao and asked him, “Why the long face? Did we slight you or something?”

You Miao got it now—Li Yan wasn’t trying to hide him away, or else he wouldn’t have brought him here. Instead, he was trying to sculpt an impression of him for Zhao Zhuo. Someone who didn’t talk much… someone stiff? And so, You Miao only gave a smile in response but didn’t speak.

Zhao Zhuo chuckled. “It’s fine, don’t force him. Let him do as he wishes.”

Li Yan put down the cup and softly patted You Miao’s hand. You Miao knew this meant he’d done well.

After Zhao Zhuo returned to the palace that night, Li Yan didn’t hang around either, as he had a wife at home. When the group emerged from the pavilion, he turned to You Miao.

“Go back and tidy yourself up. Don’t embarrass me when you take the exams in a few days.”

You Miao’s rascally personality accidentally reared its head again when he heard that, and he countered cheekily, “Please, is that even possible? You probably can’t even write essays as well as me.”

“You lookin’ for a fight?!” Li Yan yelled, readying to jump down the coach to punch him, but You Miao laughed and dodged, hopping onto Qin Shaonan’s carriage.

The carriage had been about to drive off, but it stopped for him. Li Yan looked on for a moment, but he knew that You Miao wanted to ask more about the flooding in the South, so he mounted his own carriage and left.

Qin Shaonan’s father was the Minister of Rites and the news was something he heard from his father after the morning court assembly. You Miao questioned Qin Shaonan for details and had wanted to question Li Yan, too, but Li Yan had already gone. In the end, You Miao went home with a heavy heart.

Li Zhifeng didn't follow along today, because a Quanrong was conspicuous and You Miao didn't want him to be seen by Zhao Zhuo. Plus, Li Yan had ordered him not to go. Thus, the entire time You Miao was at the party, Li Zhifeng had been sitting in the courtyard, surrounded by other students who chatted and drank sour plum juice as summer night fireflies fluttered about.

"Li Zhifeng," You Miao called out to him as soon as he returned.

Li Zhifeng was having tea with Zhang Wenhan and Zheng Yong. When he saw You Miao had returned, he stood up to go wash a towel. You Miao followed him inside, however.

"I heard today that Jiangnan is flooding."

Li Zhifeng frowned slightly. "Is Yang Prefecture affected?"

"I don't know. What do we do?" You Miao's voice was full of worry.

He changed out of his stuffy, sweaty silk brocade robe into a thin cotton student robe before walking out. Li Zhifeng joined him with a wet towel to wipe his face.

"Will Riverwave Estate be underwater too?" Li Zhifeng asked.

Zhang Wenhan overheard and asked, "There's a flood?"

You Miao nodded, his brows tightly knit.

Zheng Yong said, "Surging water comes quickly but goes away equally quickly, so that's not a problem. The real issue is waterlogging."

"Why don't I go back today to take a look?" Li Zhifeng suggested.

"If it's a flood, then there shouldn't be anything to be worried about," Zhang Wenhan said. "My ma and pa farmed the estate's lands for decades and have never seen water surge over. It'll reach Anlu at most, but Guozhuang should be safe."

You Miao relaxed a little and nodded. "That's good, then. What about the other places?"

"Jiang Prefectural City is close to the river, so it's hard to say," Zhang Wenhan said. "Sunshower Tea Estate is higher than Tea-Horse Road, so it'll be fine, too. Is it raining? The only thing I'm worried about is waterlogging. If it's raining nonstop, it'll affect the harvest."

You Miao was at a loss, and Zheng Yong said, nodding in understanding. "It's not easy being farmers, with a livelihood dependent on the heavens."

You Miao glanced at Li Zhifeng. Incidentally, Li Zhifeng was looking at him too.

You Miao said, “What I worry about the most is our waterwheel. Master Huang said that it’s only truly complete if it can endure at least one major flood.”

After a brief contemplation, Li Zhifeng said, “Let me go and see if I can learn more news about the situation.”

“Where will you do that?” You Miao asked. “Only the six ministries know about this right now. I heard Qin Shaonan say they only just brought it up during this morning’s court assembly.”

“Don’t worry, shaoye,” Zhang Wenhan comforted. “Lord Uncle is a capable man. If anything does happen, he will definitely send someone over with word. If no one’s come to the capital, then it means everything is all right.”

He was right, You Miao realized, and slowly nodded.

Zhang Wenhan added, “The Metropolitan Exam is in a few days. Once it’s over, I’ll make a trip back.”

“I’m not worried about anything except the waterwheel. I’m scared it won’t be able to hold against the storm surge,” You Miao said.

Li Zhifeng said, sitting down on the side, “If it’s just the water level rising, it will be able to hold.”

“There’s more water upstream,” You Miao pointed out. “The part of the river that cuts through the estate is also super narrow. If the water surges, then we’re in trouble.”

Li Zhifeng grunted. “Then we’ll nail in four spikes to stop the waterwheel for now.”

Nothing but concern colored You Miao’s brows. “Only you and I know the blueprint. Little uncle doesn’t know how to read it yet.”

“It’s fine, the flood isn’t gonna be that bad. Just rest easy, shaoye. It won’t be too late for me to go back and check on the estate after the Metropolitan Exam is over,” Zhang Wenhan comforted.

As worried as You Miao was, there was nothing he could do, so he had to relent on the subject.

Days later, it was the first day of the seventh month. The scorching summer day was like fire, setting the ground ablaze as all the Juren gathered at the Directorate of Education for the Metropolitan Exam. Every

examinee was allotted one room. It had been years since You Miao had last suffered this torment, and the screeching cicadas in the yard were annoying as hell.

The examiner presented the subject, and amazingly enough, it was the phrase, *"The Path is not distanced from man, for if the practice of The Path is distanced from man, such cannot be considered The Path,"* from *"The Doctrine of the Mean."* You Miao had suffered bitterly at the hands of this line—the mere sight of it caused him to recall Sun Yu's ferocious expression that was followed by a flying book. While both amused and resigned, You Miao marveled at his own good luck as he picked up his brush to begin drafting his essay.

Halfway through the exam, he heard someone talking outside in the hallway that vaguely sounded like Cheng Guangwu. You Miao was even more anxious now, and he hastily finished his composition. When he emerged from his room to hand in his essay after two days of torment, it was still as hot as a steamer outside and it drenched him in sweat immediately.

Seeing that it was indeed Cheng Guangwu outside, You Miao said, "Let's talk when we get back. Don't panic."

Once back at the dormitory, Zhang Wenhan was there as well, having also finished his exam. Cheng Guangwu was covered in sweat, his clothes clinging to his body as if he'd been fished out of water.

"Shaoye, Jiangnan flooded," he said urgently.

"I know," You Miao said. "I heard people in the government talking about it. Tell me how things are at home first."

"The estate is fine, the water won't rise all the way up there," Cheng Guangwu reported. "But it's still raining and has been nonstop for six days now. The day I left the estate, the water level of the Yangtze was already ten yards high."

You Miao was alarmed by this news and frowned. "And the waterwheel?"

Cheng Guangwu replied, "It's fine for now, but if the water keeps rising, then it'll break for sure. Lord Uncle sent me here to let shaoye know that our estate isn't short of money, so if it breaks, we can just have another one made."

But the craftsmen who had constructed the contraption were brought over from across Jiangnan, and Old Craftsman Huang had left as soon as the project was complete. Later, when You Miao had wanted to request for him to build a mill, the man was nowhere to be found. So where was he going to hire the craftsmen to build a new waterwheel?

"There's another thing that needs shaoye's decision," Cheng Guangwu said. "Lord Uncle doesn't dare to open the granary and wants to see what shaoye says on the matter."

"Open the granary for what?" You Miao asked.

"Relief efforts," Cheng Guangwu explained. "It's been raining for two months straight all over Yang Prefecture and south of Liu Prefecture. Even Su Prefecture is completely swamped. The people's farmlands are all gone. Anlu has become an ocean; it's so flooded that only rooftops are visible. And who knows how many have died from starvation…"

You Miao was in disbelief. "It's that serious?!"

"A great flood rarely seen in fifty years," Zhang Wenhan said. "I heard people talking about it too, a couple of days ago."

Only now did You Miao understand the severity of the situation. But at least it seemed his waterwheel would hold.

Cheng Guangwu continued, "Lord Uncle sent some small boats out and brought in everyone from the nearby villages. He got them to build tents by the foot of the hill on the estate's east side. But Lord Uncle doesn't dare make the decision on the food supplies, which is the reason why he sent me here to the capital. To ask."

"It's well within reason," You Miao replied. "We can't just leave people to die. Go back and tell little uncle to keep just enough food to feed the estate for one year. Open the granary and make the rest of the grain into congee to distribute to the masses."

"Let me go back, and leave Cheng Guangwu here to serve you," Li Zhifeng said.

"You leaving… Mmm… No. How long would you be gone?" You Miao asked.

You Miao kind of didn't want to let Li Zhifeng go, but Li Zhifeng reasoned, "I was there during the construction of the waterwheel. No one else would know how to nail four iron spikes into the gears to make the

wheel stop. And Old Man Huang did say that if the river water rises to the line, employing this method will prevent it from water damage."

During the construction of the waterwheel, the wooden wheel would rise along with the water level, but there was also a top line on the wall of the cliff. If the water rose over that line, then there was a chance the waterwheel could break.

"And if that doesn't work?" You Miao asked.

"Then we'll remove the scoops and reinstall them after the water retreats," Li Zhifeng replied.

Li Zhifeng's suggestion jogged You Miao's memories of the instructions by Old Craftsman Huang, but he still tried, "Yes, but…"

"I'll be back before the Palace Exam," Li Zhifeng asserted.

Today was the third of the seventh month; there was still one month before the Palace Exam, which took place on the fifth of the eight month. You Miao didn't want Li Zhifeng to leave, but he also didn't want the waterwheel to break.

"Oh yes," Zhang Wenhan spoke up. "How did shaoye do?"

Only then did the group remember the exam that had just taken place. You Miao honestly didn't know whether he should laugh or cry.

"I can probably get Gongshi," You Miao replied. "Don't know about anything else."

Li Zhifeng had gone to change his clothes, and when he re-emerged, he smiled. "Of course you'll get it."

"Don't hurry off just yet. Will you be able to make it in time?" You Miao asked.

"I'll take the north road and ride the horse at top speed. Without too many breaks, I should be able to get back in ten days. It's the middle of summer, so there's no snow." Li Zhifeng said.

Cheng Guangwu spoke up. "I came by way of the north road; there are wandering Barbarians everywhere. It's too dangerous."

"Why don't you take the south road, then?" You Miao said. "Cross the mountains of Cang Prefecture."

"I'm a Quanrong, they won't give me trouble," Li Zhifeng pointed out, and it was then that the group remembered his background. "I'm off."

"Wait!" You Miao chased after him. "Watch over things there. Little uncle must be swamped on his own, so don't hurry back to the capital.

Since you're going back, it's fine if you settle everything there first before coming back."

Li Zhifeng nodded from the horseback. You Miao looked up, and the sharp rays of the summer day forced him to squint his eyes.

"If I do get Jinshi, then I'll most likely have to stay in the capital until spring next year anyway, so you don't need to rush."

"Okay," Li Zhifeng said.

You Miao's brows twitched, looking like he wanted to say more. Before he could, however, Li Zhifeng's large, handsome figure blocked the sun and slightly tilted downward. His legs squeezed the sides of the horse, and half of him leaned forward as if he was performing an acrobatic bow. Then, he lowered his head and brushed a soft kiss against You Miao's lips.

You Miao brightened at the gesture.

"I'll fix the waterwheel," Li Zhifeng promised. Then he pulled on the reins and spurred the horse. "*Hah*!"

Hooves clacked as Li Zhifeng left the Imperial College and entered the long street, leaving behind clouds of dust.

On the second day since Li Zhifeng's departure, a thunderstorm finally crashed down on the capital; even the Imperial College wound up flooding. The students, still waiting for the exam results, rolled up their pants to wade in the water in the courtyards, and there were even some who stripped naked to shower in the rain.

You Miao was sitting in the corridor, hugging his knees and watching the rain. The raindrops cascaded from the roofs in strings as the pounding storm rendered the world a hazy white.

I wonder where Li Zhifeng is now on the road, You Miao thought.

The north road to Jiangnan would have Li Zhifeng pass by the Fortress of Yanbian and Zheng Liang Pass. You Miao wondered what Li Zhifeng felt when he crossed the vast lands beyond the border. If it was You Miao, he might be stricken and ride home—would Li Zhifeng go home for a quick look, and be the master of his own fate for the remainder of his life?

The fragrance of tea permeated the air, and Zhang Wenhan called out, "Shaoye, come have some tea."

You Miao responded, "I'm feeling something blander today, kinda craving for green tea… Li Zhifeng!"

Cheng Guangwu came out and answered, "Shaoye."

You Miao almost laughed at his own mistake. He had called Li Zhifeng out of habit, unable to change for the moment. “Bring over the Sunshower Qingfeng from the shelf.”

As You Miao and Zhang Wenhan drank tea together, You Miao commented, “Wenhan, if we both get appointed Gongshi, then no one in Jiangnan will dare to look down on our house, eh.”

Zhang Wenhan chuckled. “Shaoye, you donated a hundred thousand pounds of grain last year to the army, and now you’re sending Li Zhifeng back to open the granary for disaster relief. There is already no one in Yang Prefecture who’d dare to look down on you.”

You Miao shook his head, smiling. “That old Dad and cheap brother of mine, I wonder what they’re doing right now.”

They only chatted for a brief moment before the sound of hooves rang from outside the courtyard. The deep voice of a man asked, “Excuse me, does You Ziqian live here?”

You Miao thought that voice was vaguely familiar and sat up straight. He called, “I’m here! Who is it?”

The visitor dismounted his horse and entered the yard, where he stopped, looking at You Miao. He was wearing a bamboo hat and was decked out in armor, and a long sword hung from his waist. His left hand rested on his waist while the right lifted his hat a little.

“General Nie?!” You Miao was shocked and asked, “When did you return? Please, come inside.”

The newcomer was indeed Nie Dan, and he gave You Miao a curt nod in response. “I was summoned back to the capital today and was just on my way to the Ministry of War. I heard You-xiandi has come to the capital for the exam, so I stopped by to ask for a cup of tea.”

Nie Dan was now the Pacification Commissioner of Shuonan, a position of the third rank, and had earned the title of Grand General Wude. Having driven the Barbarians back beyond the border with his own powers alone, his name was thunderously renowned. The students in the dorms all emerged, hoping to catch a glimpse of this incredible man.

Zhang Wenhan conceded his seat and quickly invited him, “General, please.”

Nie Dan went over and sat down in the proffered chair, his hat still dripping with rain. You Miao knew Nie Dan was already aware that he and

Zhao Chao were friendly and therefore saw You Miao as one of his own. You Miao was just about to pull out fresh tea leaves when Nie Dan stopped him.

"There's no need to brew a fresh pot," Nie Dan said.

And so You Miao poured him the tea that was already sitting on the table. "Nie-da-ge, how come you came back all of a sudden? How's the northern warfront?"

Nie Dan replied quietly, "The north is fine. I was just going to ask you: can you manage to get information from the son of the Vice Minister of War?"

"I'll go find out in a few days. Da-ge, please," You Miao said, beckoning him as he passed the tea.

Nie Dan threw back the cup and said, "More. I'm thirsty."

Seeing his travel-worn state, You Miao came to realize that Nie Dan had probably rode nonstop from the north and came straight to him without having drunk a single drop of water since entering the capital. What was so serious that the chief commanding general was summoned back alone, from such a great distance?

Heart laden with thoughts, You Miao asked, "How did Nie-da-ge know I was living here?"

"His Highness the Third Prince wrote me back in the fifth month, and talked about you," Nie Dan replied.

You Miao nodded, swapping the teacup for a tea bowl and filled it to the brim for him. Nie Dan drank it all and continued speaking.

"If you're free on the seventh of the seventh month, do you want to come over for a drink?"

You Miao was taken aback, and numerous thoughts crossed his mind in that brief second. But immediately, he knew that Nie Dan had something he wanted to say to him, so he readily replied, "Sure."

Nie Dan nodded and rose to his feet, re-entering the rain, where he hopped onto his horse and left. Almost all the Juren hanging around the corridor ran out to look, some even followed him out, watching his disappearing back.

"You Ziqian!" Someone approached You Miao. "Was that General Nie?"

"Yeah," You Miao replied with a smile.

“How did you come to know him?” someone else asked. “He’s a great hero, you know!”

“I…” Remembering their past history, You Miao replied, feeling amused, “We had a dispute outside the city gates three years ago, that’s how.”

You Miao hadn’t cared for this man named Nie Dan at first; he felt nothing for him. It was only afterward that he learned Nie Dan was the Commandant of the City Watch Division of the Imperial Army, a position of sixth rank. He was a military officer responsible for the city’s defense. When he had personally inspected the caravan, it had been You Miao who was ignorant.

Later, he’d heard that Nie Dan had been transferred to Yanbian to fight against the Barbarian bandits on horseback and achieved miraculous feats. That was when You Miao began to develop some respect for the man. Over the past three years, Nie Dan had fought courageously and bloodily, climbing steadily up in rank. And now, the fact that the Barbarians beyond the border hadn’t yet launched a large-scale invasion was all thanks to him keeping things under control. Even Sun Yu sang high praises of him, remarking that the way he commanded the army was unconventional but somehow worked for him.

You Miao had a few ideas running about his mind when it came to his visit on the seventh. Since Li Yan’s faction was wary of Zhao Chao, worried that he was going to make a comeback, then no doubt they were equally wary of Nie Dan. Perhaps Nie Dan’s last-minute transfer back to the capital was Chancellor Li’s idea.

This meant the news of Nie Dan stopping at the Imperial College first upon his return would not have escaped Zhao Zhuo’s faction’s eyes and ears. A vague idea was taking shape in You Miao’s head, and he contemplated for an entire afternoon. The rain had stopped when he woke up early the next day, and so You Miao instructed Cheng Guangwu to prepare the carriage before he took off to the Chancellor’s Residence.

[Chapter 25]

The sun had returned to the capital after the rain passed, and the air was clear and refreshing. As the carriage traversed down West Changlong Street, the cicadas along both sides of the roads were once again engaged in a chattering racket. When You Miao arrived at the Chancellor's Residence, he went straight for the back entrance. Surprisingly, the boy servant guarding the door still remembered him.

"Good morning, You-shaoye," the servant said with a bow.

You Miao nodded and entered, then cut right across the garden. Though confused by his presence, a maid curtsied at the sight of him. But when You Miao got to the entrance of Li Yan's quarters, ready to push the door in, the maid's face dropped instantly.

She exclaimed, "Shaoye, you can't—"

"Oh my god—! Go away, go away—!"

You Miao shooed her as he pushed in the doors and went around the screen to mess with Li Yan. When You Miao used to visit Li Yan's place in the past, they were both only boys; sometimes when You Miao grew tired of waiting in the hall, he would go into the bedroom directly to cause havoc—he'd sneak under the blankets to grope and rub Li Yan until he *had* to get out of bed. It had been years since then, but now that You Miao was here again, he still hopped onto what looked to be Li Yan's form in bed to pull his blanket.

"Get up, get up! Look at the time!" he hollered.

Li Yan reached out to block him, but You Miao dodged and burrowed under the covers. Suddenly, a woman shrieked.

"Master—!"

You Miao had forgotten that Li Yan was already married—and that his wife was also under the covers!

Li Yan yelled, completely wide awake now, "*You little bastard*!"

The three tumbled and tangled together into a ball. You Miao paled immediately and pushed the blankets away in a hurry, rolled out of the bed, stumbling and knocking the screen over in his haste to run away, and caused a huge racket as he fled.

Li Yan got up to chase after him. He grabbed a copper bowl that was right there and hurled. It crashed through the window and struck You Miao on the head.

An hour later, You Miao was giving his little heh-heh laughs ingratiatingly at Li Yan as he rubbed where his head had been hit. Li Yan's face was dark, and the two sat in silence in the main hall.

Li Yan's wife, Madam Tang, changed her attire and came out. She seemed quite the beauty, and had the grace of a respectable lady. She didn't appear to feel awkward meeting You Miao, and only inclined her head in a polite greeting.

"Come greet your sister-in-law." Li Yan humphed, irritated.

You Miao quickly greeted, "Hello, saozi."

Madam Tang smiled and Li Yan turned to his wife to explain, "Miao-zi got used to messing with me when we were young."

"It's fine. I know you guys share a good relationship," Madam Tang replied.

"You can go have breakfast now, there's no need to wait on me," Li Yan said.

Madam Tang acknowledged her husband and took her leave with the maids.

You Miao praised, "Your wife is pretty, where did you find her? How come *I* never run into the beautiful ones?"

Li Yan glared at You Miao. "Just out with it, enough of the ass-kissing."

You Miao said after a brief thought, "Nie Dan came to find me yesterday."

"Oh?" Li Yan replied with a nonchalant air. "What did he say?"

"He wants me to go visit him on Qixi,[38]" You Miao replied.

Li Yan looked as if he couldn't believe his ears. "How come even Nie Dan fancies you?!"

"I don't think that's possible, either. What's so good about fancying me?" You Miao said.

"Isn't that guy's wife dead already?" Li Yan wondered.

"Maybe he's looking to remarry?" You Miao suggested.

"..."

You Miao snickered.

After contemplating for a moment, Li Yan said, "Nie Dan isn't a man you can cross. He's got military achievements under his belt, so just go. If

he wants you to do anything, just listen first. I bet he knows you and Zhao Chao fell out, so he wants to host a dinner to have the two of you make peace."

"Oh, okay!" You Miao nodded wisely while thinking inwardly, *Wow Li Yan, you're so smart to guess that.*

Li Yan put a piece of braised duck into You Miao's bowl and added, "That guy isn't completely on Zhao Chao's side, so just listen to what he has to say. Tell Zhao Chao that everything's just water under the bridge and be done with it. I *was* going to put you up as a Vice Minister… But now, there's actually something else I can have you do."

"What's that?" You Miao asked.

"Let me dwell on it a bit longer before I tell you," Li Yan said. "Don't come visit me so often, there's no need to be this diligent."

Not knowing whether to laugh or cry, You Miao said, "I only came once, and it was to bum some food…"

"You throw money away by the thousands, and you're missing a few meals?" Li Yan accused.

"The cooking at your place has everyone else's beat," You Miao said.

"Fine. I'll send someone to deliver you food," Li Yan said, "so stay put and stop running over here."

"Must you make me spell it out?" You Miao whined. "I visit because I miss you, you know. Why don't you deliver food to me personally in the future?"

Li Yan glared at You Miao, not saying a word, but You Miao knew he fell for things like this. While he did nothing but scold You Miao for no reason on the outside, he doted on him on the inside. You Miao smirked.

"You better put that glib cutesiness of yours away…" Li Yan lowered his voice to a quiet hush. "In spring of next year, I'll have you enter the Censorate…"

You Miao froze and stared at Li Yan in disbelief.

"Then in five years, you'll be the Censor-in-Chief," Li Yan said, slowly and clearly. "You understand? Not just anyone can take this position. All those other guys are hopeless; they've got officials in their families, so they have to avert unnecessary suspicion. So put away that glibness and act a little more holier-than-thou. And—I don't care if you're only pretending, but you better at least act upright and outspoken."

“I understand.” You Miao immediately nodded.

A Censor-in-Chief. You Miao was shaken to the core. Li Yan actually wanted to assist him in becoming the severe, iron-fisted imperial censor whose job was to scrutinize and discipline all officials! There existed a strict supervision system within the Tianqi Kingdom that governed government officials from top to bottom. Even the lowest of the censors commanded respect from regional governors, for they oversaw the local government.

You Miao’s teacher was Sun Yu, and Sun Yu was an upright and outspoken grand Confucian scholar who was once the Political Advisor. Which meant as long as You Miao pretended to be virtuous and just, and gained the Emperor’s favor during the Palace Exam, then there was a very high chance Li Yan’s design would come to fruition—and the Censorate would end up in his pocket. That would spell invincibility at court for the Li Family, with none who would dare speak against them.

“You—Zi—Qian! You’re not a kid anymore.” Li Yan pinched You Miao’s ear and hissed, “Finish your food and get the hell outta here!”

“Okay, okay.” You Miao schooled his expression.

You Miao certainly was the best choice if Li Yan wanted to place someone in the Censorate—the other faction members all had officials in their families; only You Miao had no connections whatsoever. Furthermore, his teacher being Sun Yu was extremely advantageous.

Li Yan’s ambition was enormous—dependence on Zhao Zhuo wasn’t enough. He probably intended on succeeding his old man’s position as chancellor, too. If Li Yan became chancellor, then without a doubt, he would have You Miao impeach each and every single official that opposed him and banish them all back to the countryside to work the land…

“Oh yeah,” You Miao acted like a question had just occurred to him, and he whispered, “Wasn’t Nie Dan defending the border? Why is he back?”

“That guy’s military achievements are too grand, he’s not easy to rein in,” Li Yan said. “His Highness the Crown Prince convinced His Majesty to bestow the man with a few years of luxury, so the Ministry of War summoned him back. They’ll send him off to defend Northern Shaanxi later. Someone else has replaced him in Yanbian.”

“That ‘someone else’ being one of Zhao Zhuo’s people?” You Miao asked.

Li Yan just stared at him without answering and You Miao got it, holding his tongue.

Li Yan said, conflicted, “How am I supposed to promote you, man, if you ask questions like that? If you attended court assemblies, the officials would devour you whole, like sweetcakes.”

You Miao quickly surrendered. “All right, all right, my mouth is sealed. I’ll just focus on my food, okay?”

After breakfast that day, You Miao returned to the Imperial College with gears running nonstop in his head, which killed any desire to study. He dozed off leaning against the pillars in the corridors. It was usually Li Zhifeng who he leaned against during his naps, but since the man’s departure, he hadn’t found anyone else and it made him uncomfortable all over. He had eyed Cheng Guangwu, but ended up relenting because he was too embarrassed to ask.

This was the first time in three and a half years that he and Li Zhifeng had been separated. Only two days had passed, and he was already having a hard time getting used to his absence. Although Li Zhifeng didn’t really talk when they were together, You Miao felt more confident in talking and acting with someone around.

The sunny weather only lasted for half a day before rain came pouring down once more in a cacophony of pitter-patters. It was incredibly aggravating.

“Li Zhifeng,” You Miao looked up and called after having spaced out for a while.

Cheng Guangwu replied, “Shaoye.”

You Miao didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. “Sorry, Guangwu, I’m having a hard time changing my habits.”

“What does shaoye require?” Cheng Guangwu asked.

You Miao thought for a moment, but he had forgotten what it was he had wanted Li Zhifeng to do, so he ended up saying, “Nothing, never mind.”

After a brief silence, however, he asked, “Guangwu, did you pass by Jiang Prefectural City on the way here? How’s the flooding situation there?”

"The pier is completely destroyed; none of the boats have anywhere to dock," Cheng Guangwu replied.

Well, this is vexing, You Miao thought. He should've gone back to Jiangnan with Li Zhifeng, and now he regretted that he hadn't. But Li Zhifeng must've thought the roundtrip would have been too exhausting for You Miao—by horse carriage, it was a dozen days to go to Jiangnan, then another dozen days to return to the capital. A journey of over thirty days in total. A speedy horse could complete the course in ten days, but no matter how good You Miao's physical condition was, he wouldn't have been able to endure it. Furthermore, the Metropolitan Exam results were to be released, and then the wait for the Palace Exam in between it all…

"Shaoye, tea time." Zhang Wenhan smiled, calling You Miao as he set out the tea set.

You Miao moved his legs off the corridor bench and said lazily, "Well *you're* nonchalant."

Zhang Wenhan chuckled. "Shaoye, you're worrying over nothing. You've been so sullen over the past few days that you can't even study anymore. The Zhuangyuan is still waiting for you, eh."

You Miao laughed. "I'm not sullen. It's just… I'm not used to Li Zhifeng being gone, so I can't concentrate."

Zhang Wenhan washed the cups, stirred the leaves, and chuckled. "People, yanno, when one accompanies another, going in pairs… If one of the pair leaves, it really will feel like a piece of your heart is missing."

"Mn. You're right," You Miao said. "You've been single your whole life, so how did you come to think this way?"

"My pa left us early, and my ma sat there by herself every day crying '*my son, my son.*' It didn't take many years before she was gone, too. At the time, I thought that when two people are together for so long, their fates become intertwined…"

You Miao contemplated the idea for a moment, then said, "But how come when my mom left, my dad still ate well, slept well, and lived the good life?"

The rhetorical question made Zhang Wenhan feel awkward, and You Miao laughed.

"I'll stop clowning with you. Your dad and your mom were in love; that's a real married couple. My dad didn't love my mom, so of course it

didn't matter to him when she died. In fact, I dare say he couldn't wait for the scary wife to die."

"Don't say that." Zhang Wenhan laughed as he poured You Miao tea, then respectfully offered the cup to him.

You Miao added, "Good ol' married couple, they say. It all depends who cares and who doesn't. If you don't care, then it doesn't matter how long you're together, you'll always find each other annoying."

Zhang Wenhan didn't dare respond to that, so he only smiled. As for You Miao, the more he chatted, the more he felt his heart stir. Watching the rain made him think of the situation at home, which made him think of Li Zhifeng. And then of his waterwheel. He kind of wanted to throw everything away and go home now.

Through the hazy rain, it was as if You Miao could catch a glimpse of the nonstop rainstorms and vast floods of Jiangnan. The people had met disaster—their houses were completely submerged, and there were little boats shuttling all over the waters. If it wasn't for You Miao's relief efforts, countless people would have starved to death or drowned. You Miao sighed.

Zhang Wenhan said, "I hear the court is still in dispute and dragging their feet over issuing grain for disaster relief."

Scholars were passionate about discussing politics, and since Zhang Wenhan visited the library every day, he naturally heard the chatter of his peers—most of which was about government corruption.

You Miao huffed indignantly. "Asking for a bit of rations is like asking for their lives. Back when they pushed for the Goryeo warfront's food drive, they howled and cried at the top of their lungs. But now that Jiangnan's in trouble, who *knows* how long they'll take."

"Yeah." Zhang Wenhan sighed. "By the time the grain is released and the financial aid makes it, it'll probably be winter. How many will have starved to death by then?"

You Miao nodded. Remembering the heavy mantle of duty Sun Yu had entrusted him before his departure for the capital, his heart opened up a little more.

Days later, it was the seventh of the seventh month and the rain had stopped. At the capital, many had come out for the Crafter's Festival, and crowds of beautifully dressed young men and women had formed pairs by

the river.[39] You Miao departed for Nie Dan's residence to attend the invite, and when the horse carriage stopped at the front entrance, he dug out a bit of money and sent Cheng Guangwu out to enjoy himself before he went inside.

There were two guards standing watch at the front doors, but the yard inside had obviously been neglected for many years; it was overgrown with tall weeds. The doors were wide open, so You Miao called out as he crossed the threshold. He stopped at the second entrance with his hands crossed in his sleeves.

"Nie-da-ge! *Nie-da-ge*!"

Nie Dan emerged. He was wearing a long robe of rough fabric, and when he saw You Miao, he said, "Dinner isn't ready yet, have some tea first."

"All good, don't mind me," You Miao said with a smile as Nie Dan returned to busy himself in the kitchen.

You Miao brought out a case of tea from his sleeve and rested it upon the stone table in the garden. He spotted a copper tea set on it and helped himself, brewing a pot of tea.

"Li…" You Miao stopped when he realized there was no one beside him. He had to go out to the carriage to grab the jug of wine that was stored inside it.

"Nie-da-ge," You Miao called, poking his head in the kitchen, "Are there wine bowls?"

Nie Dan was looming over the stove, opening the pot cover. He answered, "Next to the jugs."

You Miao grabbed a couple of wine bowls and inspected them under the light. They were completely covered in dust.

Nie Dan explained, "It's been years since I returned to the capital. I haven't cleaned much of the house; pray xiandi won't mind."

You Miao quickly said, "Of course not."

Nie Dan dropped the vegetables into the pot to steam and then finally emerged from the kitchen to take a break. He sat down to have a drink with You Miao and watched him silently, but his eyes twinkled with amusement.

You Miao arched an eyebrow and stared back at Nie Dan. There were blade cuts on his wrists that had only just healed, and compared to years

ago, his whole appearance had changed. The winds and sands of the Great Desert were unforgiving—Nie Dan's skin had tanned darkly, and he looked noticeably more aged.

"Ever since our first meeting, I knew that you didn't care for me." Nie Dan took a sip of the wine and asked flatly, "So why the sudden 'da-ge' endearment?"

Nie Dan's question made it awkward for You Miao to attempt to cozy up into his good graces, so he said, "I had the temperament of a child back then. General Nie is a magnanimous man; pray he forgives me."

However, Nie Dan simply tapped their bowls together in a toast and said, "Don't take past matters to heart. If you don't scorn me, then do still call me da-ge."

And so the smile returned to You Miao's face. "Nie-da-ge."

You Miao's address was genuine. Nie Dan had nothing but a bare house and his just, outspoken character. You Miao had also heard Sun Yu speak highly of the man, so he genuinely respected and was in awe of Nie Dan from the bottom of his heart.

He knew that Nie Dan called him over today because he had things to tell him. If his speculations were correct, then it was something to do with Zhao Chao. Li Yan thought Nie Dan was holding a dinner to have him and Zhao Chao make peace, but since they never actually fell out, there was naturally nothing to mend. Maybe Zhao Chao had already told Nie Dan everything in his letter.

So now the ball was in Nie Dan's court.

Sure enough, Nie Dan spoke up after a brief hesitation, "His Highness the Third Prince went and sought you out."

"Yes." You Miao gave a light nod. He didn't dare speak rashly, since he didn't know what the relationship was between Zhao Chao and Nie Dan, nor how much they divulged to each other.

"The Goryeo defeat wasn't his fault. There were many variables at play, and half of them were the factions within the government clamping him down… I heard your estate isn't big, but you still donated a hundred thousand pounds of grain. Nie-da-ge toasts you with this bowl of wine."

You Miao understood what he was trying to say, and flashed a modest smile in return. "It's within my duty. Isn't the point of studying to serve our country?"

Nie Dan nodded slowly. “Xiandi’s career in officialdom is bright. Please don’t mind me sounding overly familiar, but in the future, please carve this into your heart: once you’re learned, use all that you’ve gained to serve the country.”

You Miao got it now. Nie Dan didn’t call him over to lecture him, but from the standpoint of service to the country, he certainly would be a bit worried that You Miao would get pulled into the Li faction. No doubt Zhao Chao had mentioned something similar in his letter to Nie Dan. These soldier types were all straightforward characters, but even though they didn’t know how to play mind games with the civil officials at court, they nonetheless worked wholeheartedly for Tianqi’s greatness, and fought courageously on the frontlines for that very cause.

“Yudi [40]will absolutely bear this in mind. Da-ge, come, drink.”

The two were drinking alcohol on empty stomachs, and after a few gulps, signs of inebriation colored Nie Dan’s gallant face. He said, “His Highness is also feeling suffocated in the capital. You’ve seen him; he’s never really had any companions since he was young, so if you’re free, do socialize with him a bit more. But of course, studying is priority.”

You Miao made a noise of acknowledgement. He realized Nie Dan was an incredibly principled man, and not very fun. When drinking and chatting with him, the subject of conversation surrounded nothing but talk of proper conduct—pretty boring. No wonder he didn’t win any favors at court.

Nie Dan gestured for him to wait a moment, then headed back to the kitchen to check on the food. He returned with the dishes and set them properly on the table. When he placed two sets of chopsticks down, You Miao realized Zhao Chao wasn’t coming.

However, Nie Dan said, “Enjoy, xiandi. Please excuse me for a moment.”

You Miao was a little baffled, but Nie Dan simply up and left through the backyard. Just as You Miao was about to start on the entire table of food, however, another man emerged from the side corridor. It was Zhao Chao.

“Sorry for the wait…” Zhao Chao came over holding a package wrapped in grease paper. He explained, “I went over to the Ministry of War

around dusk and got held up."

You Miao smiled at the sight of Zhao Chao. "What about Nie-da-ge? He made all this food, but he's not gonna have a bite?"

"He's got things to do, don't worry about him. We'll eat," Zhao Chao said.

He went to close the doors of the courtyard. From beyond the enclosure walls drifted the laughter and conversations of those attending the Qixi Festival. Fine wine was poured, and the lamp hung under the tree emitted a warm, yellow glow that illuminated the pair and their feast.

"I got someone to make inquiries about the exam results," Zhao Chao said. "And incidentally, Li Yan was doing the same. Your scroll is approved for Gongshi, so they're just waiting for the results to be announced now. The Palace Exam is on the fifth of the eighth month. Are you prepared?"

You Miao lit up. While he felt that he should be able to pass the exam, the confirmation still made him very happy.

"How do I prepare?" You Miao asked.

Zhao Chao looked troubled by the question. "I don't study. I've only read a few books on military strategy, so how would I know? Use this month to read more books from the library, I guess."

You Miao was horribly amused by the response. Zhao Chao raised his cup.

"Come, come, gege toasts you. Come back with a Zhuangyuan."

The two clinked cups. You Miao's mind strayed to something else, and he spoke up a moment later. "Li Yan summoned me a few days ago, and I told him about Nie-da-ge inviting me over today."

Zhao Chao's eyebrows arched, looking as though something had occurred to him. Then, his eyes shone with delight. "Brilliant. That's a clever move!"

You Miao sighed. "Li Yan wants me to stay in the capital after the Palace Exam. He plans to have me enter the Censorate."

Zhao Chao was stunned. Then he mumbled, "Well, that guy's got a big appetite—but not the ability. Xiandi, it's up to you whether you enter the Censorate."

"What do you mean?" You Miao asked.

Zhao Chao hummed. He was sitting casually with one of his legs propped on the stone bench. He pointed at You Miao with his chopsticks as

he replied in a hushed voice.

"He's not planting you there, he's using you to gain favor with my father. Your parents are not court officials, and on top of that, you're the former Political Advisor Sun Yu's student. If you score as one of the top three in the exam, then you can be appointed as a supervisory censor and posted out in the territories for three to five years before you get transferred back to be an imperial censor. Ten years down the road, you can be promoted to Censor-in-Chief…at which point, the Li father and son can impeach whomever they wish; whomever they don't like."

Zhao Chao's speculation was the same as You Miao's, and he nodded slowly. "So I'll just go along with him?"

"Yeah, do that," Zhao Chao confirmed. "This is great. If Li Yan has these plans, it means he's actually guarding against my brother too. Listen to everything Li Yan tells you to do for now, and come spring next year when you enter the Censorate, secretly connect with my brother and obey him. That brother of mine doesn't treat me that great, but he's absolutely diabolical. Once you're secure in your position, you won't need to rely on Li Yan anymore. So if you obey my brother, the two of you together can topple the Li faction. Everything will become simpler then."

"What about you?" You Miao asked. "When do I find a way to transfer you out of the capital?"

"No rush," Zhao Chao said. "Nie-da-ge is trying to find a way right now. Figure out how to keep yourself safe first, and don't be too impatient. After the Mid-Autumn Palace Exam, my father will be holding a banquet. You'll definitely get a seat, whether you score the top three or not. I'll teach you a few things to say when the time comes. First, my father will ask where you're from, what your background is like, right? Once Father starts the conversation with you, you just keep bringing the subject over to… hmm, I still gotta think about that. But definitely have him remember how good my mother was to him in the past."

It took You Miao no time to get it. He and Zhao Chao gazed at each other, and in each other's eyes, they saw that familiar look. At that instant, You Miao felt an indescribable heartache wash over him. They shared an almost similar fate; Zhao Chao's life was so much like his own.

Zhao Chao smiled self-mockingly. "Let's not talk anymore about this on a festive day. Drink. Come, eat."

You Miao made a noise of agreement and the two started reaching for the dishes. You Miao was hungry, so he wolfed everything down, clearing the plates like a whirlwind stealing the clouds away.

"Where's Li Zhifeng?" Zhao Chao asked.

"He went back," You Miao replied. "There's flooding at home. He's the butler, and my little uncle can't handle everything by himself."

Zhao Chao commented, "Tens of thousands of people died in the Jing and Liu Prefectures, but the government is still dragging their feet in issuing food supplies. All the papers are stuck in the Ministry of Revenue."

"'Cause there's no money," You Miao said.

"It's true that there's not much left in the country's coffers, because all the money is in the hands of those few senior officials," Zhao Chao said. "The Pings, the Lis, the Qins… The families that hang out with you all have hundreds of thousands in their savings."

You Miao shook his head wryly, and Zhao Chao said, "Why do we keep talking about these depressing subjects? If it's not home matters, then state affairs. Whatever. There's no curfew tonight, so I'll take you out to listen to songs. Come, let's go."

The milky way was like a ribbon across the night sky of the Crafter's Festival, and the river cutting through the capital was alight with floating lanterns as lovers of the mortal realm strolled in pairs. Zhao Chao and You Miao came to Qianqiu Bridge during their stroll, and down below were canopied boats languidly rocking by. The sound of the zither drifted from within.

You Miao leaned over the edge of the bridge to look down below. At that moment, the magnificence of the capital was far away, leaving only him watching the floating lights, mesmerized as they swayed with the waves.

"What are you thinking about?" Zhao Chao was also leaning over the bridge railing, touching shoulders with him.

"Nothing much," You Miao mumbled.

The scenery was like a dream. You Miao's mind was blank, with only a river full of lantern lights reflected in his eyes. As he watched the lanterns drift, he couldn't help but ask, "Your mom… Was she good to you? What kind of person was she?"

Zhao Chao replied apathetically, “She passed away when I was very little. I don’t remember.”

“Was your dad good to her?” You Miao asked.

“Which Emperor has ever stayed with only one person until the end? It was good enough that she ate well and lived well. What about your old man? How’d he treat your mom? I remember you mentioning it in the letters—it wasn’t great either.”

You Miao nodded, and then he suddenly noticed a figure by the riverbank. It was Nie Dan.

Zhao Chao draped an arm around You Miao’s shoulder and tugged him in for an embrace. “Why don’t you stay with me from now on? I won’t be fickle like my father…”

A feeling struck You Miao. He tilted his head to look at Zhao Chao, only to find a foreign emotion in his eyes.

Zhao Chao smiled and met his gaze. “Even when we each form a family and marry a woman, we can still be together…”

You Miao laughed out in spite of himself. “Your Highness, you’re joking.”

Zhao Chao straightened. “I’m serious.”

You Miao’s heart started pounding in his chest. He understood what Zhao Chao meant, but he didn’t know how to respond at that very moment. Male homosexuality was commonly practiced in the Kingdom of Tianqi, and dignitaries having cut-sleeve pastimes was nothing extraordinary. You Miao had known this since he was young; he and Li Yan used to share something sort of similar. But ever since he got Li Zhifeng, the man had spoiled him for anyone else—he’d even tossed out the idea of marriage. Spending his days in Li Zhifeng’s company, letting himself be pampered all day and living life together like a married couple was a charming thing in its own right.

Only Li Zhifeng understood him. You Miao didn’t want to woo or rouse the interest of anyone else anymore, either. Joking around was one thing, but if he actually had to strip and climb into bed to do it with Zhao Chao, like how he and Li Zhifeng did it, You Miao would feel inexplicably awkward. He and Li Zhifeng had grown accustomed to seeing each other naked, but how could he do *that* with other people? It was impossible.

Having Li Zhifeng with him in this life was enough. Yet the way Zhao Chao now spoke with such earnestness, it almost felt like he was trying to extract a promise from You Miao—a romantic engagement. This was the first time in his life that You Miao had ever faced such a frank confession, and he couldn't help but feel awkward.

Zhao Chao was smiling broadly at him the entire time, and just as You Miao was thinking of how to reject him, he said, "On the night of the Lantern Festival that year, you were standing in the lantern market watching the lights. I was riding past the intersection and, by chance, I saw you. One glance and you've stayed on my mind for years."

You Miao could feel his cheeks burning up; he couldn't nod or shake his head in response, as neither would be right. But it seemed Zhao Chao enjoyed watching him flustered like this, and kept teasing him.

You Miao stammered, "Don't…don't say that."

He looked down at Nie Dan, who was by the riverbank under the bridge, and forcibly changed the subject. "What's Nie-da-ge doing there? Let's go say hi?"

"Don't." Zhao Chao stopped him. "Nie-da-ge is mourning his wife."

"Da-sao passed away?" You Miao asked.

Watching Nie Dan in the distance, Zhao Chao replied pensively, "It was a long time ago. He and da-sao first met at Wanshui Bridge on Qixi. Later, they got married and da-sao became pregnant. Nie-da-ge was transferred at the last minute to fight the Tartars, but she ended up suffering a difficult labor. His son was lost, and she died as well. She kept calling Nie-da-ge's name on her deathbed. Half a year later, when he finally returned to the capital, there was no one left."

You Miao's eyes were wet, and Zhao Chao murmured next to his ear, "After that, he always comes here every Qixi as long as he can make it back to the capital."

It was almost as though You Miao could see that scene from many years ago: a boat carrying a woman languidly passed under the bridge. She came ashore where Nie Dan was standing now, waiting for her, and he extended a hand to her.

For some reason, You Miao was reminded again of Li Zhifeng, who was far away at home.

The gleaming of lanterns outshines the moon,

Drums resound uproarious 'til dawn's tune.[41].

Below the bridge, the river shimmered with the reflection of lantern lights. Who knows how Li Zhifeng was doing now—had the flood water receded? If so, then he ought to be drinking plum wine under the shade of a tree with Qiao Jue. Except he was not one to be so idle… He was likely already on his way back to the capital. If he was by his side right now, he would probably stand there simply and quietly without speaking a word.

If it was Li Zhifeng by his side right now, then he would certainly disappear when You Miao turned around—but when You Miao turned around again, he'd reappear behind him holding a lantern. He would pass him a candle and tell him to go release the lantern by the river.

You Miao started to chuckle. Li Zhifeng always liked to buy him odd little things, coaxing and spoiling him like a child—but that was what You Miao fell for.

"What are you laughing about?" Zhao Chao was a little surprised by his sudden mirth.

"Nothing." You Miao snapped out of it and gave a sheepish smile. Zhao Chao said something else, but You Miao heard none of it.

"Come over and spend the night at my place?" Zhao Chao ventured.

"No, I've got to get back," You Miao replied.

Zhao Chao was taken aback at first by his response, but then he nodded and asked, "Did you hear anything I just said?"

You Miao flashed a smile. "Your Highness."

Zhao Chao frowned, sensing his intent. You Miao thought about Nie Dan, then thought about Li Zhifeng. In the years past, perhaps Nie Dan often had regrets and thoughts of how he should have stayed by her side. Now, in the present, Li Zhifeng had left him—and for the first time in three years, You Miao realized his importance.

You Miao said, "My heart…mmm, is taken. I'm heading back."

He then turned and left.

Dumbfounded, Zhao Chao cried, "You Ziqian! Wait!"

But You Miao had disappeared into the massive crowd of carriages and people on the other side of the bridge. As though all the noise around him had grown distant, he didn't hear Zhao Chao calling him from behind.

All is unchanged, the same as always,

Save for the heart that has turned middle-aged.

Flitting fireflies sprinkled the secluded yard of the National University on this Qixi Festival night. Many of the students had gone out, leaving only Zhang Wenhan and another student idling under a tree. When he noticed that You Miao had returned, he went over to help him change out his robe.

"Where's Guangwu?" You Miao asked.

"Didn't he drop shaoye off at the General's residence? You didn't come back together?" Zhang Wenhan asked.

You Miao smacked his head and said self-mockingly, "Well, I've lost my head walking."

The student who was also enjoying a cup of tea chuckled. "Anything fun out there?"

"Pretty men and women." You Miao laughed. "River lights as bright as day, a dazzling world, a glamorous capital."

Zhang Wenhan teased, "Then why didn't shaoye have some more fun before coming back?"

You Miao snorted. "It's boring. There's no one keeping me company, it's not fun."

You Miao went back to his room while Zhang Wenhan paid someone to send a message to the General's residence to tell the carriage driver Cheng Guangwu to return. When You Miao re-emerged after his cold bath, his hair still dripping wet, Cheng Guangwu was back.

Cheng Guangwu rolled up his sleeves and chuckled. "Did shaoye not have a good time? It seems it just won't do without Butler Li around."

You Miao only smiled, not responding. All of a sudden, he was seized by the whim to pick up a brush and write a letter home.

The night gradually sank into tranquility.

As merriment scatters and quiet is found,

The season of melancholy creeps around.

[Chapter 26]

As the hour turned late, the Juren returned one after the other, clamoring energetically outside. Cheng Guangwu came into You Miao's room to drive the mosquitos out, closed the window curtains and put up the mosquito net. While he busied around, You Miao was staring blankly at an equally blank piece of paper.

"Shaoye," Cheng Guangwu called, "It's late. Get some rest."

"Mm," You Miao answered noncommittally.

The cup of tea next to him had already gone cold. This was You Miao's first time writing to the estate. There were a few things he wanted to say, but he didn't know how to word them to Li Zhifeng. It was funny, thinking about it now. They had never separated since their first meeting all these years ago, and while together, they didn't usually talk. So what tone should he take for this epistolary business?

You Miao jotted down a couple of lines, but they didn't sound right. No matter what he wrote, it wound up sounding weird and cringy, even to himself. He pursued this endeavor until midnight, at which point he really could not come up with anything else. He finally gave up and simply scrawled, *"Miss you, come back soon."* He sealed the envelope and gave the letter to Cheng Guangwu to mail the next day, and then went to bed with a smile.

Yet You Miao didn't immediately fall asleep—he tossed and turned all night instead, his heart palpitating, and his hips grinding against the bed of their own volition through the thin layer of his underpants. In the haze between sleep and wakefulness, he dreamt of Li Zhifeng kissing him again, and a rush of heat surged from the pit of his heart, welling uncontrollably. He woke the next day to a cold, wet spot in his pants—and, red-faced, he had to ask Cheng Guangwu to wash them.

The rain had stopped and the cicadas began chirping again outside. Three days later, on the tenth of the seventh month, the list of successful examinees who had passed the Metropolitan Exam was posted in public for a massive clamoring crowd to see. You Miao didn't care about it for himself, since he knew for certain he had passed, but he was a little concerned about how Zhang Wenhan had fared.

"Shaoye! Shaoye!" Cheng Guangwu cried as he charged hastily into the courtyard where Zhang Wenhan and You Miao were playing chess, and

they both looked up.

"Congratulations, shaoye!" Zhang Wenhan said with a smile.

Cheng Guangwu announced, "Shaoye, you and Zhang Er both qualified as Gongshi!"

You Miao was delighted by the news. He gave Zhang Wenhan a thumbs-up and said, "Now we can get ready to go for the Palace Exam together."

Zhang Wenhan was elated, and he said laughingly, "It's because the heavens know that shaoye will need a companion going to the palace. Wenhan just got lucky that the good graces the heavens bestowed on shaoye rubbed off on him too."

The two shared a laugh—You Miao thought that he was lucky to have such a friend in him. Cheng Guangwu took a letter from his breast pocket and handed it to You Miao.

"I also have a letter from Lord Uncle here. Hurry and write him back to tell him the good news, shaoye!"

You Miao felt his heart stop. Then he asked immediately, "Who delivered the letter?"

It was one of the boy servants, Yaoguang, who had come. Well-mannered and quiet, he bowed from where he stood outside the courtyard. "Congratulations to our young master."

You Miao granted a small reward to both Cheng Guangwu and Yaoguang; even if they were from his own household, the title was still something worth celebrating. He asked as he waved Yaoguang over, "Come in and tell me how things are at home."

Much like Li Zhifeng, Yaoguang also usually remained quiet and stood until he was called upon. Maintaining a calm and stoic expression, he didn't joke around and only spoke what needed to be said, and not a word extra. He was You Miao's favorite among the boy servants. Presently, he was covered in dust and obviously travel-worn. He entered the courtyard as instructed, and washed teacups and poured tea for You Miao and Zhang Wenhan.

"Everything is fine at home. The waterwheel almost broke when it flooded last month, but Butler Li saved it," he answered.

You Miao read Qiao Jue's letter while listening to Yaoguang. The flood submerged more than half of Yang Prefecture, but Riverwave Estate was

fortunate enough to make it out unscathed. Li Zhifeng had made it back in time—without him, the waterwheel would have broken and washed away. But nonetheless, a small part of the waterwheel was still damaged; the chain had come undone and sunken into the river. Li Zhifeng was currently leading a crew to fish it out.

It had taken Qiao Jue and his people three days and three nights to draw the accumulated rainwater from the canals. Fortunately, the skilled craftsmen who had helped build the project at Riverwave Estate were prepared for this—the canals could also drain water on top of delivering it. Learning this news, You Miao's highly-suspended heart finally relaxed.

After he read Qiao Jue's letter, You Miao found another one inside the envelope. He shook the paper open absently, but when he realized who it was from, his face split into a wide smile.

You Miao had only mailed his letter three days ago and it probably hadn't reached Riverwave Estate yet, but Li Zhifeng's letter had arrived here first. It was in Li Zhifeng's own handwriting, the characters disorderly and harsh. The few simple lines of the letter were written with so much pressure that the strokes were nearly etched through the paper in certain parts—clearly the work of someone who rarely wrote.

The contents read: "*There is unfinished business at home, but I will be back soon. My heart burns with how desperately I miss you. I have a million words to say yet I do not know how to speak them, nor to whom I should. Consider this letter the same as seeing me and take care of yourself. —Feng*"

You Miao burst out laughing as he read the letter, and the more he thought about it, the funnier it became to him. He boasted great learning but struggled to write much of anything at all, even after racking his brains. Meanwhile, Li Zhifeng was the exact opposite. He had so much to say, but his limited literary ability impeded his expression. It was all too funny.

Seeing You Miao's mirth, Zhang Wenhan teased, "Let me see? What did Li-xiong write?" Then he started laughing as well upon reading the letter. He belted out into a song, tapping the teacup, "*The long years I'm gone—fair weather and landscapes—fine no longer, a mirage! Though my love's e'er so deep and true—to whom can I say this, but you*?[42]"

You Miao's sides were in stitches from how hard he was laughing as he tried to snatch the letter back from him. He said between fits of laughter, "No, no. It's '*I wish to send a letter to my lover, severed from me by endless ranges and rivers*'[43]! Give it back! Give it back already!"

In a merry mood, Zhang Wenhan clowned around with You Miao as several students watched on, laughing as well.

"A letter from the missus?" one of them teased.

Smiling, You Miao folded the letter back up and tucked it away with a "mhmm" and no further explanation, then returned to his room.

That day, You Miao read Li Zhifeng's letter over and over, thinking to himself that when Li Zhifeng was back, he would take him to stroll around the city as soon as the Palace Exam was over. He *should* be back for the fifteenth of the eighth month, right? The Emperor would be hosting a banquet for the officials that day, and it'd be the perfect time to take him to the palace and broaden his horizons.

The Palace Exam would be taking place on the tenth of the eighth month, which was a month away. Li Zhifeng's letter had perked You Miao up, and he went to study in the library every day.

Now that Yaoguang was here to serve You Miao as well, between him and Cheng Guangwu, there were enough hands to go around. Once the exam results were released, the students who didn't pass had all gone home, and all of a sudden the National University was left quite deserted. The majority of the Juren only wanted to earn a title, so achieving Gongshi was good enough for them. Those who remained to seriously prepare for the Palace Exam were the ones with ambition and aspirations.

When the time came for the Palace Exam on the tenth of the eighth month, Li Zhifeng was still not back. Thus, You Miao took Yaoguang instead to attend the exam.

The Palace Exam's essay topic was personally drafted by the Emperor, and the test itself was a dissertation on a state policy. At dawn, the examinees entered the grounds of Yangxin Hall where the Palace Exam was to be held. After packing the front entrance of the hall, they bowed when their names were called, and were then led by the palace attendants to their seats within the courtyard.

You Miao was feeling a little nervous. Without Li Zhifeng around, it felt as though something was missing. But when the exam scroll was unrolled, You Miao was taken aback. The topic was on the affairs of the northern frontier!

Unable to resist, You Miao looked up and scanned around the room. Surprise was written on all the other Gongshi in the hall. The policy dissertation was the last round of the imperial state exams, and since the Emperor was the one who had devised the question, it was thus an enquiry on the thoughts of the people in regards to the policy in question. It was asking the Gongshi to express their views, while infusing all that they had learned in their lives in order to provide an answer, which would thus be presented as "countermeasures."

Countless times, You Miao had pondered what the test question would be; Sun Yu had also discussed policy dissertations with him. The topic was usually about civil livelihood, restrictive governance, government integrity, and other such things. There was a precedent for exam topics to approach the main subject by discussing small cases, or by illustrating the world at large before asking the examinees to drill down to the nitty gritty. But to discuss the war strategy of the frontier? You Miao had never expected this.

With the way the Barbarians were bombarding the border and beyond, the situation at the northern frontier was gravely more severe than years before. Perhaps the Emperor of Tianqi drafting this topic was also a sign of urgency.

When it came to the subject of the northern frontier, You Miao was confident that there weren't many among the examinees who knew more about the current events than he did. But what really troubled him was this: should he speak his mind? For the past three years, he had exchanged letters with Zhao Chao and studied the art of war with Sun Yu. But there were many things that weren't easy to discuss, and some that shouldn't be discussed at all. The subjects were too sensitive and could easily provoke the Emperor or the high court officials.

You Miao looked up again to scan his surroundings, then he raised his eyes to the front of the hall and heaved a heavy sigh.

The topic of the Palace Exam seemed to be indicative of You Miao's future—perhaps there really was a pair of eyes watching over him from above. From the Quanrong Li Zhifeng to the Third Prince Zhao Chao, to the

education he received from Sun Yu and all of his own aspirations in serving the country, everything was inextricably linked to the northern frontier.

As the sun rose, the rays spilled through the glass shingles of Yangxin Hall, scintillating and blinding.

Mind made up, You Miao raised his brush and began his dissertation with the thesis: "*The supreme art of war is to subdue enemies without fighting.*" Every single stroke of his writing was prim and proper, each word was weighed, and each sentence deliberated.

As high noon climbed, everyone was covered in sweat; drops of it dripped onto the papers. But You Miao's seat was situated under a tree whose branches gently swayed, lending a soft breeze, making him appear perfectly calm and collected. As the sun slowly sank into the western horizon, however, You Miao's pace gradually slowed until it came to a complete stop. After a brief deliberation, he scrunched up the paper, rolling the dissertation he had been writing since early morning into a ball and chucking it at the tree. There were already many examinees who had finished, and they watched You Miao in bemusement, snickering like they had discovered something fascinating.

You Miao pulled out another paper and wrote down the words: "*A war to end wars is acceptable, despite it being war.*[44]"

This time, he wrote quickly and his writing was not as carefully crafted as before. But the content was everything Sun Yu had taught him—though it abided by none of his constructs. You Miao mentioned the Goryeo war from years ago, he brought up the Quanrong tribe, then mercilessly pointed out the nation's internal conflicts and the restrictions that resulted from faction disputes. The implied accusation in his tone was directed at the Li faction *and* the Emperor.

At dusk, the conclusion drum sounded thrice and the examiner came to take the scrolls. You Miao was the last one to go, looking forlorn as he left the palace, dragging his shadow long down the stone tiles amid the bloody setting sun.

Yaoguang packed up and followed behind You Miao.

You Miao stretched, letting out a long breath, then smiled. "If it doesn't work out, we'll go home. After reaching this stage, I have no regrets."

When You Miao got back to the dormitory that night, Zhang Wenhan asked what he had written. His face immediately fell after You Miao told him in detail what he had handed in.

"Shaoye," Zhang Wenhan started, but was briefly at a loss for words. "You're certainly a brave one!"

You Miao only sounded bored, however. "Who cares."

He was well aware that the first thesis was the best one; not only did it go along with Chancellor Li's hopes, it also matched the Emperor's desires. *The supreme art of war is to subdue enemies without fighting.* Was that not what everyone at court was hoping for? Sun Yu also said that a capable official could triumph over millions of fierce soldiers. However, what Sun Yu had meant was to *fight*—beat the Barbarians down before peace negotiations. Those who exceled at wars didn't care for battles, but it didn't mean they were afraid. This thinking was at complete odds with what Li Yan and his dad were doing.

At this point, the northern frontier needed to hold steady, and the only thing they could do was fight. The mere thought of Zhao Chao's devastating defeat made You Miao burn with fury. He and Li Zhifeng had been together for years, and You Miao had learned a thing or two from all that he had told him. Among the Barbarians, the Tartars were the most brutal. The Hans surrendering money and silk would not make them grateful in the least; they would only think the Hans were scared of them. They would have to suppress the havoc-wreaking Barbarians at the border with force while bestowing mercy upon them; that was the only way they could reclaim the centuries of peace.

Whatever. You Miao gave up. He had drunk two cups of tea since his return, and feeling a little dizzy with no appetite, he said, "I'm gonna go nap a bit. I'll skip dinner."

Mouth dry, You Miao lay in bed until midnight and woke up with his forehead burning. He called Yaoguang, who was sleeping on the floor, to pour him water. Noticing something amiss, Cheng Guangwu came into the room to feel You Miao's forehead, and his face subsequently dropped.

"It's probably heatstroke! Go call a doctor!"

Yaoguang was shocked. After all, the time he had served You Miao was the shortest among the others, and he was not as attentive as Li Zhifeng. In his carelessness, he hadn't realized You Miao had gotten

heatstroke. Hastily, he crawled up from the floor and ran out into the night in search of a doctor. You Miao's face was pallid and he was unable to even sweat—obviously a symptom of having over-sweated during the Palace Exam, and because he was slaving away on his essay, he had forgotten to drink water. Thus, he had gotten heatstroke in the post-Autumn heat spell. And this collapse spelled three days in bed for him.

* * *

"Is Li Zhifeng back yet?" You Miao asked weakly when he woke the next day.

Yaoguang had brought the doctor back for a follow-up, who prescribed some medicine for the ailment.

"To answer shaoye, Butler Li might be on his way back," Yaoguang replied.

"Still not here…" You Miao mumbled listlessly.

When Zhang Wenhan learned of You Miao's sick state, he was thoroughly alarmed and busied himself caring for You Miao—going in and out, and at the same time chasing Yaoguang around to beat him. But You Miao waved dismissively, gesturing not to blame the poor boy.

After downing a bowl of medicine that chased the summer heat away and remaining on an empty stomach, You Miao soon felt more at ease. There were voices outside from what sounded like visitors, and he heard Cheng Guangwu say, "My young master has heatstroke and is resting right now."

Eyes still closed, You Miao asked, "Who was it? Did someone come from the estate?"

Cheng Guangwu answered, "It was someone from the Chancellor's residence. Shaoye is invited out to drink."

You Miao didn't even have the energy to respond, so he simply lay there. In the evening, he took another bowl of medicine. He was feeling a little better, but his chest was still a little tight, so he stayed in bed. When night came, he heard a familiar voice.

"Didn't you sit under a tree? How did you get heatstroke? Open the bed curtains more, don't stifle yourself."

It was Li Yan.

Li Yan's cool fingers felt You Miao's forehead. "Think you can eat some congee? I think this is all caused by hunger. Sit up and try."

You Miao let out a huff and Li Yan personally leaned over to help him up. You Miao's head was spinning, but after a few bites of congee, he felt better.

"Haaahhh—!" You Miao heaved contentedly.

"See?" Li Yan said in exasperation. "You just don't have energy because of hunger. The heat's already past."

At a time like this, he stopped his usual clowning with You Miao.

After You Miao regained some energy, he took over the bowl and began to eat on his own. His thoughts flew all over the place while he ate, and he suddenly remembered that he almost arraigned the Li father and son in his policy dissertation. Hopefully, Li Yan would never find out.

You Miao wanted to start a conversation, but he didn't know what to say.

Li Yan teased, "Why are you so weak?"

"Gosh," You Miao replied. "Who can predict this sun in the capital? I never experienced such vicious heat when I used to live here, and back in Jiangnan, I rarely left the house. I've neglected my martial arts practice for months now."

"I'll have some ginseng soup made and sent over; just drink that," Li Yan said. "You're gonna have to go to the palace for Mid-Autumn in a few days, so don't go out and tire yourself."

The Palace Exam was back on You Miao's mind now, and he knew Li Yan had his way of getting news, so it would seem he had passed. Maybe he had even landed Jinshi with a specific degree.

He asked, "How'd I do?"

Li Yan was just about to answer when he heard Cheng Guangwu's voice outside.

"Your Highness."

Li Yan was taken aback at first, then flashed You Miao a sly smile, wriggling his brows. You Miao gestured that he would take care of it, and Li Yan gave You Miao's hand a pat before rising to his feet.

He patted down his robes and said, "I'm off."

Just as Li Yan was leaving the room, Zhao Chao pushed aside the screen curtain and came in. The two came face to face.

Zhao Chao laughed, incomparably handsome. "Li Yan?"

Li Yan cupped his hands in greeting and smiled as well. “Your Highness.”

“I’m here to check on You Ziqian. Sit for a bit longer?” Zhao Chao said.

Li Yan quickly declined, “Father asked me to make a trip to the Ministry of Rites. I happened to pass by, so I came to visit Miao-zi.”

Zhao Chao looked thoughtful, but Li Yan politely bade farewell again, and so Zhao Chao watched him leave with a smile. But as soon as he turned to sit down, his expression changed completely.

These people really do change faces at the drop of a hat, like flipping through the pages of a book, You Miao thought, finding it both hopeless and funny.

Zhao Chao’s ears twitched imperceptibly, and after making sure Li Yan was truly gone, he asked with a frown, “How did you get heatstroke? What were your servants doing?!”

“I’m the one who was careless. I’m better now,” You Miao said. Having eaten the congee earlier, some strength had returned to him. “Why are you here?”

“No reason,” Zhao Chao said, reaching out to feel his forehead. “I heard you fell ill, so I came to check on you. Why was *he* here?”

You Miao replied, amused, “He probably wanted to teach me how to say a few things. But with you here, he had to leave.”

Zhao Chao thought for a moment, then said, “I also went over to the Ministry of Rites, but I didn’t hear anything. You got second class in the Palace Exam?”

You Miao was none the wiser. “He didn’t say. He only told me to get better so I can attend the Mid-Autumn Banquet at the palace.”

“That means you got Jinshi,” Zhao Chao said, understanding.

The two marveled at the idea and You Miao sighed again. This should’ve been a happy occasion, but why was he feeling so empty? There was not a single soul to celebrate with him—it was so much better back when he got Jieyuan!

Zhao Chao asked with a grin, “Isn’t this a good thing? Why are you sighing like that?”

“I don’t know either,” You Miao replied derisively.

Zhao Chao patted his knee. “Let me tell you some stories.”

That night, an oil lamp was lit inside the room. There was pitter-pattering outside as rain began to fall once more, washing away the tightness in You Miao's chest and refreshing the air. By second watch, someone from the Chancellor's residence came to deliver a food box and ginseng soup—all of which You Miao wolfed down, feeling re-energized afterward.

Zhao Chao selected a few tales of the northern frontier's customs and lifestyles to tell. He didn't mention what he had said at Qixi, acting as though nothing had happened, and returned the natural friendship they shared to what it used to be.

You Miao grew drowsy as he listened, only half-responding here and there. Thus, Zhao Chao gently laid him down. He stood up and left, quietly closing the door behind him.

You Miao's head was clearer a few days later. As he ate his ginseng soup, he suddenly broke out in cold sweat when he thought back to that night, when Li Yan and Zhao Chao had run into each other visiting him. *That was close*, he thought.

As for the Palace Exam, You Miao wasn't sure what had come over him—maybe it was the dizzying heat of the sun, or maybe it was a momentary impulse—that made him write *that* for his policy dissertation. It was practically begging for death! But unexpectedly, by sheer stupid luck, his piece hit the mark and aligned with both sides' wishes.

What did Li Yan want? Was it not someone who could dissociate from the Li faction and fearlessly speak their mind, someone who possessed the potential to become the Censor-in-Chief? Not only did You Miao's dissertation criticize the Li faction, it criticized the Emperor as well—Li Yan would only think that it was an intentional act on You Miao's part and wouldn't suspect him at all.

And what did Zhao Chao want? Was it not someone who could help speak for him in front of his father…? The more You Miao thought about it, the more he felt like he lucked out. There really was no other explanation except that his old ma was watching over him from above, considering what he had written for the Palace Exam while feeling light-headed. What an auspicious sign for his future career in officialdom; even he himself couldn't help but praise his own good fortune.

The results of the Palace Exam were released that day, and to everyone's surprise, the examiner was the one who had come holding the imperial edict.

"By imperial decree—from Liu Prefecture, Pei County, You Miao, courtesy name Ziqian, Father You Dechuan, Mother Qiao…

"First class Tanhua! By grace of the Emperor!"

You Miao was dumbstruck, while the entire National University erupted. The students rushed about, spreading the news, and countless people crowded into the dormitory's courtyard, fighting to be the first to catch a glimpse of the Tanhua.

The examiner chuckled and said, "Hurry and express your gratitude!"

You Miao snapped out of it and knelt down.

The examiner then unrolled a second imperial edict. "From Yang Prefecture, Anlu Village, Zhang Wenhan, courtesy name Mohuai, is bestowed the status of Jinshi, Third Class Chuanlu, by grace of the Emperor…"

Zhang Wenhan's eyes were red and he couldn't stop shaking. Brimming with tears, he hastily dropped to his knees in a daze to express his gratitude, crying, "Mom! Dad! Do you see me from above in heaven? Zhang Er is a Jinshi now—!"

You Miao could hardly believe it—he had gotten Tanhua?! Zhuangyuan, Bangyan, and Tanhua made up the First Class; Tanhua was third place, one of the top three. What did this mean?! The Emperor read his dissertation and *still* conferred him the rank of Tanhua!

"Congratulations, shaoye! Congratulations!" Cheng Guangwu was so excited he could hardly speak. He turned and instructed Yaoguang, "Quickly. Fetch some broken silver to reward everybody!"

You Miao accepted the edict and the examiner continued, "Today is the fifteenth of the eighth month. The Emperor will hold a banquet in the Imperial Garden this evening. Remember to go to the palace at youshi time, and someone will come to pick you up at that hour."

You Miao bowed. "This junior will bear that in mind."

The examiner cast You Miao a glance and remarked, "Collected and self-possessed, you will be a great pillar of the nation yet!" Then he gave You Miao's shoulder a squeeze before he left.

Zhang Wenhan was muttering to himself in excitement, feeling as if he was dreaming. You Miao, however, was clouded in gloom. With a sigh, he trudged back to his room.

"Tanhua," he muttered to himself. He suddenly found that there didn't seem to be anything to be happy about. He felt empty, with nothing and no one to fall back on.

Cheng Guangwu came in with a grin. "Shaoye! Our family's finally made it now!"

The clamor outside was giving You Miao a headache, and he said, annoyed, "All right, all right, everybody out. I need some peace and quiet."

"Shaoye, are you unhappy? We'll have to hurry to bathe and perfume and change. The palace banquet is tonight!" Cheng Guangwu said.

You Miao tossed the imperial edict aside carelessly and shouted, "Yaoguang! Yaoguang! Get in here!"

Yaoguang was outside distributing grants to the students. The courtyard was packed with a constant stream of people coming and going like a bustling market, and even the common folks nearby had rushed over after learning the news to catch a glimpse of the Tanhua and get some reward money. But Yaoguang heard the anger in You Miao's voice, so he hurried back inside, not daring to speak.

You Miao slammed the door of his room shut with a loud bang, scaring everyone gathered outside, who then heard the Tanhua scolding his servants.

You Miao shouted angrily, "Go get a horse and ride back to the estate *immediately*! Tell Li Zhifeng that if he doesn't come back *right now*, then I'm just gonna buy another servant here at the capital! He said he'd be back before the Palace Exam, so what the hell is this?!"

You Miao paused, realizing he'd lost his mind. What was he this mad about?

Yaoguang got a scare, too, and didn't dare answer. You Miao smiled wryly and said, "Never mind, forget I said anything."

Finally having vented what had been weighing on his mind, You Miao felt a bit of his anger subside. He wasn't actually mad that Li Zhifeng didn't come; he was mad that it felt like he didn't care about him. But the truth was, Li Zhifeng had done well enough already, always listening to You Miao's whims. And besides, he was only following You Miao's orders to go

back to the estate. Li Zhifeng lived for him, and thought only of him. It was simply unjustifiable to work him to the bone, but You Miao just felt put off and was upset anyway. It wasn't because Li Zhifeng didn't make it back; he wasn't at fault.

"Go on. Go buy some lemon grass," You Miao said. "Heat the water for a bath, I'm all sweaty. Then I'll change. Which of you want to go to the palace with me?"

Yaoguang and Cheng Guangwu traded a look. Yaoguang seemed to have something to say, but was silenced by Cheng Guangwu's slight shake of his head.

You Miao noticed the subtle exchange and immediately asked, "What did you want to say?"

Yaoguang started, "Shaoye—"

Cheng Guangwu cut him off with a frown and said, "Yaoguang, go heat up the bath water."

But You Miao insisted, "Talk to me first. What did you want to say?"

After a brief hesitation, Yaoguang said, "It's not… It's not that Li Zhifeng doesn't care about shaoye. He fell off the cliff during the flood…"

Although Yaoguang had only just started, You Miao was frozen in shock.

"...and broke his leg," Yaoguang finished.

The sunlight filtered into the dark room as You Miao sat there in a dazed stupor.

In the courtyard, Zhang Wenhan was accepting congratulations from the other students, nodding to them as he wiped his eyes. A moment later, a loud "*Wah*!" erupted from inside the room as You Miao broke into miserable tears.

The people looked at each other in dismay, murmuring that the Tanhua really was something. He didn't cry when receiving the edict. He didn't cry when he was congratulated. He only cried once he was back in his room with the door closed. A true man of talent!

That afternoon, You Miao lay exhausted inside a warm bath, with his eyes closed and his hair undone and drifting in the water.

Yaoguang said as he washed You Miao's hair, "Li Zhifeng said to not disturb shaoye, and that he'll come back to the capital as soon as his leg is better."

“Make a trip back as soon as you’re done here to tell him to stay home and rest. I’ll go back myself first thing tomorrow morning,” You Miao said.

“Shaoye,” Yaoguang said, “Li Zhifeng and Lord Uncle had me keep quiet about it because they were worried that you’d rush back. If you were to go back now, it’ll be my leg that’s broken next.”

You Miao didn’t know whether to laugh or cry at that, and in the end, settled for angrily splashing Yaoguang with a faceful of water. Yaoguang let out a rare laugh, then left with a nod and a bow, switching with Cheng Guangwu who came in to wash You Miao’s back.

“Call Yaoguang back in here!” You Miao hollered. “I’m not done grilling him yet!”

“Shaoye,” Cheng Guangwu said miserably.

“What is it now?” You Miao snapped.

Cheng Guangwu reported glumly, “We only brought four sets of clothing from home, two of which were just laundered and aren’t dry yet. The other two are casual robes. There isn’t enough time to get anything tailored now. Should we go to the store and buy ready-made clothes?”

“I’ll just wear whatever. Who cares!” You Miao said.

It had been so busy outside that it only now dawned on Zhang Wenhan and Yaoguang that You Miao was going to a palace banquet with nothing to wear! The clothes they had brought from Riverwave Estate weren’t exactly up to the occasion, and it was already too late to have a new set made. You Miao usually knew how to spoil himself, but he had been rather occupied with other things since arriving at the capital.

“Whatever’s fine,” he said absently, “Just grab a set of hemp clothes or something; it doesn’t matter, really. For all we know, the Emperor might even praise me for leading a modest life.”

A moment later, a newcomer had arrived. It was Changyuan, the oldest boy servant in the household, and he whispered an exchange with Yaoguang in the hallway.

“Changyuan, is that you? Get in here,” You Miao called.

Changyuan entered with a smile. “Congratulations, shaoye. Lord Uncle knew shaoye would definitely place high in the exam and was worried that you’d be short on money, so he sent me to deliver silver bills.”

“How’s Li Zhifeng’s leg?” You Miao demanded. “Be honest with me or I’ll send you and Yaoguang both to the army.”

Changyuan's smile froze.

You Miao continued, "He's the one who sent you to the capital to try and keep me here, am I right?"

You Miao's head was all fogged up before, but now that it had cleared up, his gears were turning faster than everyone else's, and he hit everything on the mark.

Changyuan hastily replied, "Butler Li's leg is fine, he just can't ride horses right now. He thought about returning by carriage, but he knew he would only make you worry if he showed up like that, so he decided to recover at home before coming."

You Miao grilled Changyuan thoroughly, asking about everything from how Li Zhifeng fell to where he was injured, getting to the bottom of it all. He grilled him until Changyuan vowed high and low on pain of being struck by lightning that everything had been said; it was only at that point that You Miao felt even remotely reassured. When You Miao stepped out of the bath to get dressed, Changyuan respectfully presented a letter and three thousand silver bills.

You Miao asked frigidly, "Is this three thousand actually from little uncle, or is it from that cheap old man of mine?"

Changyuan quickly answered, "Shaoye is sharp. Two of the three thousand was indeed given to us by Sunshower Tea Estate. Lord Uncle said that it's free money anyway, might as well use it, so he had me bring it along."

You Miao's eyes reddened. He didn't even spare the money so much as a glance, opting instead to shake open Li Zhifeng's letter. It was Li Zhifeng's reply to that letter You Miao had written on Qixi night, and in it was the poem "After Passing the Exam" by Meng Jiao[45]:

No longer need I boast the days of woe,
For in exams I've ranked, my spirits aglow.
On spring's breeze, I ride so free,
Chang'an's splendor in a day I see.

Directly below the verses was a single line: "*Wait for me. —Feng*" Included in the envelope was a small handful of crushed osmanthus flowers.

You Miao was caught between laughing and crying as he read the letter, his heart warm. There was a lump in his throat. Back when he used to spend all day goofing off in the capital, Li Zhifeng had always been by his side—now that he had scored the prestigious title of Tanhua, all Li Zhifeng offered was Meng Jiao's poem to express his sentiments. Swarms of emotions choked You Miao, but above all, sadness was the most apparent.

Noticing something was off with You Miao, Changyuan immediately said, "Shaoye! Lord Uncle has one more thing for you. Let me…let me just…"

Changyuan shot Yaoguang a meaningful look, who took the hint and quickly handed over a wooden box. Changyuan opened it and showed You Miao its contents.

"We made these mooncakes at the estate ourselves. Lord Uncle said… they'll bring you luck to attain the Zhuangyuan title, but I didn't get here in time and you only got Tanhua… It's all my fault. I deserve punishment…"

You Miao didn't know what to do with these goofy servant boys. He smacked Changyuan's head and said, "Never mind that. Go prepare the outer robe, it's time to go to the palace!"

Changyuan produced another cloth bag and said, "Butler Li personally went to Yang Prefectural City to have these clothes made for shaoye."

Perfect timing! The looks on everyone's faces melted into ones that were thanking the heavens as Changyuan shook out the new set of robes. Embroidered in the best needlework of Jiangnan, the deep blue and green robe was tastefully elegant without being ostentatious. The lapels were stitched with an auspicious snake pattern in gold thread, and the fabric of the robe itself had subtly visible cloud patterns.

You Miao changed into the robes, and Changyuan took out an agate ring to adorn his finger. He then opened a small box, which held You Miao's mother's jade pendant. It was the same one Li Zhifeng had kept on him all this time, the one You Miao had given him three years ago to save his life. The white jade was then fastened onto You Miao's belt as the finishing touch. You Miao looked himself over in the mirror while the others muttered appreciatively.

He was ready to go to the palace in hemp robes—plain clothing had its own charm, after all—but since Li Zhifeng had gone to the trouble of

having Changyuan bring him these robes, it felt meaningful to be wearing them instead.

It was Mid-Autumn, and the moon was as round as a cake. Since Changyuan had brought several big boxes of mooncakes from the estate, You Miao invited the other students for moon-watching and tea in the courtyard.

As evening approached, the horse-drawn carriage sent by the palace pulled up outside. You Miao climbed in alone, not bringing anyone with him in the end. He left only brief instructions behind before he closed the curtains and departed for the palace.

[Chapter 27]

The lights of the palace shone as resplendent as day. Ten miles of lily ponds and three seasons of osmanthus encompassed the grounds. While the fragrance of osmanthus blossoms didn't enshroud the place like it did in Jiangnan, the flowers were thick with their own meaning here in the Central Plains. You Miao knew the banquet tonight was of the utmost importance; he couldn't say a single wrong word and he couldn't take a single misstep. He went over what he would say over and over in his head until the horse carriage pulled into the side garden, where he alighted nervously.

With a lantern in hand, a eunuch respectfully beckoned him. "Lord Tanhua, this way please."

You Miao nodded in acknowledgment. Even now, this still felt surreal as a dream. Had he really scored First Class and became the Tanhua? News had come too fast this entire day, one announcement after the other; for the moment, he still hadn't yet processed everything. Although he was nervous, his mind was home in Jiangnan. Qiao Jue was probably moon-watching by now, clinking glasses with Li Zhifeng as they drank to the moon.

You Miao sighed, looking a bit glum.

The eunuch leading the way in front turned his head at the sound and asked, "Is Lord Tanhua troubled by something?"

You Miao mentally chided himself for showing his emotions and appearing too candid. After all, he was here to attend a banquet held by the Emperor. He quickly smiled and said, "I wonder who the Lord Zhuangyuan is this year?"

"It is Chancellor Li's son," said the eunuch with a smile. "And the Bangyan is a gentleman from Hengshan County, Sichuan."

You Miao nodded slowly, looking thoughtful as the eunuch led him to a remote, quiet place in the Imperial Garden. There, You Miao noticed someone was inside the gazebo next to Taiye Pond. The person was standing with his back facing them, and his hands clasped behind. Beside him was another large man who appeared to be a military officer.

The officer was in conversation with the noble, and it only took You Miao a second to recognize them—it was Nie Dan and Zhao Chao!

"Lord Tanhua, please."

The eunuch leading the way stepped down once he led You Miao to this point. Traversing the winding corridors, You Miao made his way

toward the gazebo. Nie Dan and Zhao Chao were still mid-conversation when they realized You Miao was walking toward them.

Nie Dan's attire was plain as always—he was dressed in a deep blue military robe that had faded with wash.

"Your Highness!" You Miao greeted with a smile as he hopped into the gazebo.

He was just about to greet the two properly when "Zhao Chao" turned around, facing him. Turns out, it wasn't Zhao Chao—instead, it was the Crown Prince Zhao Zhuo!

Surprised, You Miao quickly bowed in full respect and greeted, "Your Highness."

The one conversing with Nie Dan was indeed Zhao Zhuo. When he saw You Miao, his face split into a wide smile.

"Lord Tanhua, it's been a while," he said, throwing You Miao a wink.

You Miao knew Zhao Zhuo was referring to their frolic at the brothel with Li Yan and the others, but this was something the Crown Prince could say openly—while You Miao absolutely could not.

So he only responded awkwardly, with an embarrassed smile, "Your Highness is jesting."

Nie Dan said, continuing from where their conversation left off, "I still must return to the defense soon."

Zhao Zhuo looked contemplative, then replied unhurriedly, "I will advise my father. General Nie needn't worry."

Nie Dan nodded. He gave You Miao a hard look before he cupped his hands in salutation and took his leave.

After Nie Dan had gone, Zhao Zhuo didn't speak and only stared appraisingly at You Miao with smiling eyes. You Miao redonned an apathetic expression and stood to the side, ready to heed orders. Although Zhao Zhuo was the honorable crown prince, You Miao was aware of his own position. Zhuangyuan, Bangyan, Tanhua…including all the Second Class special degree Jinshi attending the banquet tonight, they would all become pillars of the nation. In other words, they were future court officials—and the future emperor was Zhao Zhuo. They were bound to see each other often, and in some ways, this meant Zhao Zhuo had to be polite to You Miao, too.

You Miao thought for a moment, looking like he had something to say, but Zhao Zhuo spoke up first.

"Why do you look so down?" he asked.

You Miao smiled. "This subject dare not say. News came too fast today, so I am overwhelmed…and dismayed."

Zhao Zhuo's smile brightened, and he patted You Miao on the shoulder. "Your dissertation was excellent. After Father read your countermeasure, he sat in Taihe Hall the entire night yesterday evening, unable to find sleep. Your teacher is Political Advisor Sun—Sun Yu?"

You Miao quickly replied in full modesty, "This subject indeed studied under him back in Liu Prefecture."

Zhao Zhuo grinned. "Mister Sun was also my first teacher."

You Miao's eyes lit up, and he asked in wonder, "You Highness was also…also…"

"Yes." Zhao Zhuo chuckled. "I've been disciplined by him, and harshly at that. Come. I'll take you around the palace. We can walk and talk."

You Miao snuck some hurried looks at Zhao Zhuo, not daring to stare too closely. Although Zhao Zhuo and Zhao Chao weren't born of the same mother, they nonetheless had some resemblance. Their biggest difference was that Zhao Chao was brusque and straightforward in his action and speech, whereas one felt much more at ease and natural when talking to Zhao Zhuo. As expected; it wasn't without reason that the Emperor of Tianqi had established the eldest principal son as the crown prince and favored him.

Zhao Zhuo took You Miao along as they traversed the Imperial Garden, the smile on his face unfading and their conversations full of wit and humor. It didn't take long before You Miao opened up and shared past stories of Sun Yu. He talked about how he used to be disciplined, how he was punished by way of transcriptions, and toward the end, they were both sighing in grief.

"Political Advisor Sun is a good teacher," remarked Zhao Zhuo pensively. "When I was young, I hated him to death. But now when I look back, it's hard to find someone like him."

You Miao nodded with a grin. "Fortunately, this subject was seventeen when entering his tutelage and understands this truth."

Zhao Zhuo turned around and studied You Miao, smiling. “Which is why when I see you, it feels as if we are old acquaintances. Sure enough, it’s because we were taught by the same teacher…”

“To my dismay, this subject also feels a sense of familiarity at the sight of Your Highness,” You Miao replied.

Zhao Zhuo was a little surprised at first, but he soon discerned the meaning behind You Miao’s words and flashed an understanding smile. “I do somewhat resemble san-di.[46]”

You Miao nodded languidly in affirmation as Zhao Zhuo brought him to where the banquet was set up in the Imperial Garden. Many were already seated there.

“Thank you for your patience, everyone,” said Zhao Zhuo with a smile. “Father is currently paying respects to the ancestors in Renhe Hall. He will join us shortly.”

The crowd nodded, and Zhao Zhuo motioned for You Miao to take his seat. Meanwhile, he approached another table to sit with some senior officials, though their conversations did not stray from subjects of the young.

The head seat of You Miao’s table was vacant—probably reserved for the Emperor. Li Yan was sitting in the first seat to the right, not meeting eyes with You Miao. The next seat down was the Bangyan—he was a man dressed in a brocade robe, but his skin was rough and tanned, looking weathered. He was likely someone from an impoverished background.

One table down from the head table was where the Second Class Jinshi were seated, including Qin Shaonan from the Ministry of Rites. He gave You Miao a small nod, and after exchanging greetings, You Miao took his seat and started an on-and-off conversation with the Bangyan.

Both sides exchanged their names; the Bangyan’s name was Chen Qing, and after a few questions, You Miao discovered that he was from a renowned clan! Although Chen Qing’s family throughout the generations were dedicated farmers, their ancestor was *the* Grandmaster Chen Tuan.[47] You Miao couldn’t help but feel solemn respect. After another few exchanges, however, he found the way the Bangyan spoke rather strange—one could say he was assuming the act of an otherworldly sage, but not quite, what with how he stammered and stuttered. One could say he was

concerned for the world, yet all he spoke about was ancient history and alchemy. You Miao didn't know how he felt about him at all.

"The harvest this year is bad," Chen Qing said.

You Miao lamented, "From Sichuan, to the Liu and Yang Prefectures… I worry famine is looming again."

"Heaven and Earth are amoral; thus they do not care for any living things in the world," Chen Qing said. "Sometimes Heaven…will not care for changes in the mortal realm. For example, the way it is now will not be the same as another time… In the eyes of Heaven, living beings are all…are all…a reflection of the Will of Heaven, and therefore there is no regret in mortal death."

"Yes, you're right." You Miao looked like he was heeding his wisdom in full reverence, when he was actually cursing the guy's mom in his head.

Chen Qing gave a smile, then turned to Li Yan. "What does Li-xiong think?"

"Heh."

The corners of Li Yan's lips twitched without mirth, not even wanting to waste his breath on talking nonsense. You Miao winced, hard. This guy, Chen Qing, must've matched minds with the Emperor in the subject of Taoist Arts,[48] which was how he ended up on the Golden Billboard.

You Miao let the conversation with him die shortly after and turned around to chat with the Jinshi on his right, but the man certainly was respectfully deterrent. Moments later, the chatters in the garden came to a stop, and everyone rose from their seats. The Emperor of Tianqi had arrived.

The Emperor was sixty-one this year—just one year past the golden sixty—and spent his days drunk with books and art. In recent years, egged on by some unknown cultivator somewhere, he began to practice alchemy in the palace in search of immortality. Dressed in a robe embroidered with dragons, yet wearing a Taoist cap tagged with a yellow talisman, he looked neither Taoist nor Emperor. He made a few pleasantries before having the officials take their seats.

Emperor Zhao Mao's smile was affable and good-natured. "Happy Mid-Autumn. Be at ease, my dear ministers, and enjoy yourselves."

As the palace maids emerged with the dishes of the feast, You Miao couldn't resist stealing a few glimpses of Zhao Mao, thinking, *This is the Emperor?* It was his first time meeting the monarch, and he didn't think he resembled Zhao Zhuo or Zhao Chao that much—maybe a little bit.

The Emperor exchanged a few casual words with Li Yan, but was obviously much more interested in speaking with Chen Qing.

"We have seen what you wrote in your dissertation," Zhao Mao said. "'The Way to Heaven.' Who taught you these things?"

"To answer Your Majesty, when he was little, this subject studied with an otherworldly priest back home, atop the peak of Mount Heng."

The conversation between the Emperor and the Bangyan went on next to You Miao's ear, but he was distracted by the sight of an empty seat next to the Emperor. The one to whom the seat belonged still hadn't shown—whose seat was it? You Miao turned his head to look at the other two spots. Zhao Chao wasn't here, so it was most likely his.

Zhao Mao stroked his beard pensively. "And how old is that man?"

Respectfully, Chen Qing replied, "To answer Your Majesty, when this subject left Mount Heng, shifu was already a hundred and thirty-one years of age."

Everyone at the banquet stirred.

You Miao couldn't help but wonder aloud, "Are there actually people in the world who can live to such a great age?"

He didn't doubt Chen Qing, although that was how it sounded in the ears of many.

Chen Qing explained, "Maintain minimal worries and desires, follow the Will of Heaven, live in inaction…all this c-can of course allow one to live to a great age. However… How long one lives and *how* one lives is not to be compared. For example…uhm, for example, a mayfly is born in the morning and dead by night, but still it makes part of the world's living creatures. Can it not be considered equal to a tortoise or a crane? Of course it can."

Zhao Mao considered the answer and smiled. "This makes sense. And what you speak captures the true essence of Taoism. However long one lives is not to be forced." He then turned to You Miao. "And you are You Miao?"

You Miao quickly answered, “Yes. This subject is a citizen of Liu Prefecture, You Miao, courtesy name Ziqian.”

Zhao Mao remembered him now, and glanced to the left of the banquet where the great scholar of the Directorate of Education sat. The old man nodded languidly in confirmation, and Zhao Mao turned back to continue the conversation.

“We have seen your background. The You Family by the Yangtze is a considerably great clan. The tribute teas in the palace are all provided by Sunshower Tea Estate.”

Why isn’t Zhao Chao here yet? You Miao wondered. *Never mind. Since His Majesty’s asking about it now, I’ll just go with the flow*.

“This subject left home at a young age and studied in the capital for a few years before returning to Jiangnan,” You Miao answered. “Presently, I do not get on well with my father and have been driven from home.”

“Oh?” Zhao Mao chuckled. “As a son, one must do one’s duty to serve the parents. I see the rhetoric of your dissertation flows with the sharpness of Sun Yu. He is shrewd in his old age, and you are but an innocent, newborn calf. You are proud with great ambitions, that’s true, but you also possess a general knowledge of the cardinal principles of righteousness. So how did you end up driven from home by your father?”

When You Miao only sighed, Li Yan chuckled and replied for him, “Your Majesty does not know, but when You Ziqian used to study in the capital, he had run with my crowd. Later when he went home, he almost lost his position as the eldest principal son. It was thanks to his mother, who left him with an estate, that he was able to afford the expense of school. It was actually not easy for him to return to the capital.”

Zhao Mao’s face darkened immediately when he heard this. “What is going on? How can the eldest principal son be deposed? You Miao, tell us in detail now; if there is an ounce of injustice, we will back you!”

There was mirth in Li Yan’s eyes, signaling You Miao to just tell his tale. You Miao grumbled inwardly, *You’re a ruthless one, you little bastard*.

He handpicked a few incidents to speak of in detail—ones including his parents, the older brother who came after, as well as Shen Garden. Finally, he talked about how his father had never liked him because of his mother.

“You only have yourself to rely on for everything, after all,” You Miao finished with a smile.

Zhao Mao was amazed by the tale. As he processed it in his mind, it seemed to stir a memory in him. He sighed deeply.

“A day as husband and wife means devotion for life. You mother is, at the very least, your father’s legal wife—how could he ignore this affection? Even if your parents’ relationship goes downhill, what wrong have you committed as the child?” Zhao Mao commented.

“They say there are two eldest principal sons at home, but I no longer have any care to fight my brother now,” You Miao said. “Besides, my mind is not entirely on farming. I purchased a loyal servant back when I used to live in the capital, and it is thanks to him being by my side that I was able to pull through over all these years. I hope to request for Your Majesty’s grace to remove his slave status and give him formal citizenship.”

Zhao Mao snorted. “That is not a problem—nothing but the effort of a single word. We accept your request. But that Father of yours, neglecting the convention dictated by the sages, scorning the difference between the legal and the common, disregarding the natural reverence for the Heavens, the Earth, the Ruler, the Family, and the Teacher[49]—how is that acceptable?!”

Now it was You Miao’s turn to be stunned. He quickly urged, “Peace, Your Majesty. Peace.”

“An outrage!” Zhao Mao exclaimed. “If all marriage proceedings follow your father as an example, and allow two legal wives and two eldest principal sons, is that not a complete derangement of proper order? Say something on the matter, Minister Huang…”

“Peace, Your Majesty,” the great scholar from the Directorate of Education soothed. “This is indeed an unconventional matter. The Liu Prefectural Government should take care of it.”

“Mmm.” Zhao Mao nodded, appeased.

The Jinshi were talking among themselves in low voices, but when they heard Zhao Mao enraged, they all stopped their conversations to look over at the head table, not knowing the reason for his displeasure. You Miao wasn’t loud when he told his story, so not many had heard it.

Zhao Mao practiced Taoism, and as the nation followed the conduct of those on top, the people seemed to exude transcendence, taking after the philosophy of inaction. Be that as it may, the convention of etiquette passed down by the ancestors for thousands of years was deeply rooted, and therefore untouchable. Not even the royal family dared go against the code of conduct and ethics, so You Dechuan's actions were utterly unthinkable. It was no different from heresy, a complete disregard of proper conventions—how could Zhao Mao not be outraged?

Zhao Mao turned to Li Yan. "We will leave this for you to deal with. Tanhua's family is also considered a scholarly one, so how can such a transgression be permitted? Is this not asking to be the laughingstock of the entire world?"

Li Yan swiftly answered, "Yes, Your Majesty. You Ziqian, quickly thank His Majesty for his grace."

"D-deal…?" You Miao was a little stunned, but quickly snapped out of it and said, "Thank you, Your Majesty, for your grace!"

But how would something like this be dealt with? You Miao couldn't figure it out. Could Zhao Mao actually back him in his family affairs? But You Miao soon realized…yes, of course Zhao Mao could. Because he was the Emperor.

You Miao wanted to ask about a few more things, but Li Yan shot him a look, signaling him to stop his questions, and so You Miao didn't pursue the conversation further. At the same time, Zhao Mao sank into deep contemplation, as though a memory had surfaced.

The mood of the banquet had turned peculiar, and none of the Jinshi knew what You Miao had said to cause this change.

Li Yan, on the other hand, was taking full care of You Miao, scooping him some lily shrimp—You Miao's favorite dish in the past. You Miao nodded in appreciation and ate. When his mother's matter had been mentioned just now, You Miao couldn't help but feel a little wistful. Through all the trials of the past few years, whether things were good or bad, he never really felt at peace. Now that the subject had triggered his melancholy, hearing the Emperor say "We will back you" made his tears well up.

Ever since he was young, not once had he felt affection from his parents. The more he thought about it, the more You Miao felt himself

pitiful. Thank goodness he had Li Zhifeng, who always humored him in all sorts of ways.

Zhao Mao suddenly spoke up after his long contemplation. “Where’s Chao-er? Why is he not here yet?”

You Miao felt his heart stop. It seemed the plan had worked. Zhao Mao sent attendants to go search for Zhao Chao, and it didn’t take long before he came.

Zhao Chao was wearing a military robe of striking black today. He entered the Imperial Garden in urgent strides, his expression dark with distress, and his arrival caused a stir. Contrasting Zhao Zhuo, he gave off the air of a military man.

You Miao peered at him from where he sat, wondering the reason for his tardiness. When Zhao Chao approached the table, the other Jinshi exchanged looks of dismay with each other, not knowing who he was. Just when they were about to stand and bow, however, Zhao Chao had already bent down by the Emperor to whisper a few words. His eyes absentmindedly swept across the table, seeming to be looking for someone —until his eyes landed on You Miao.

You Miao met Zhao Chao’s eyes, and Zhao Chao reassured him with a look. But the faces of the Emperor, the great scholar of the Directorate of Education, and Li Yan, who sat closest to the Emperor, all dropped.

As soon as Zhao Chao had relayed the message, he turned and left. You Miao was still confused, but Zhao Mao immediately rose to his feet, knocking over the wine cup in his haste.

“Enjoy yourselves, dear ministers,” Zhao Mao said. “We will be taking leave first.”

Everyone stood up to respectfully see the Emperor off. At the other table, Li Yan’s father also received the news and exited the banquet with Li Yan hastily following after him. All at the same time, many other high officials left and went down the corridor with the old Emperor.

Surprise colored the faces of all the Jinshi; everyone knew something big must’ve happened, but none dared to comment. But what could’ve occurred? It was Zhao Chao who had come to deliver the message, which meant—You Miao’s mind was spinning lightning fast—war must’ve broken out at the border!

It had been a month since Nie Dan was transferred back to the capital, so the border had been missing a commanding officer. Before, Li Yan and Zhao Zhuo had been scheming to have Nie Dan transferred to the South, so it was little wonder that the Barbarians would be tempted to make a move and encroach on the border cities. Was this good or bad for Zhao Chao? For the Crown Prince's faction? For Nie Dan? You Miao was so absorbed by the countless thoughts in his head that he tasted none of the food he put in his mouth.

A moment later, before the wine was chilled, a hand came to rest on his shoulder.

You Miao had been deep in thought the whole time, so he didn't notice anyone approach him. When he snapped back to the present and looked up, he saw it was Zhao Zhuo. The Crown Prince only threw him a look before he turned around and left the garden.

"Excuse me," You Miao said, hastily putting his chopsticks down. He got up to follow Zhao Zhuo.

Zhao Zhuo walked in front, with a team of eunuchs trailing behind. You Miao ran to catch up to him, then stopped and patted his robe, straightening it.

"When we enter the study in a minute, you will not be asked to speak, so just listen," Zhao Zhuo instructed.

Taken aback, You Miao hastily said, "Yes, Your Highness."

With an unreadable expression, Zhao Zhuo took You Miao to cross the front corridors. They stopped just outside of the Imperial Study. There were two guards stationed at the door. Zhao Zhuo took a deep breath and shook his arms out. You Miao took the cue and quickly approached to help him straighten his robes. One of the guards was going to announce their arrival, but Zhao Zhuo waved to dismiss the action and went inside from a side door with You Miao in tow.

Nie Dan's voice rang just as they stepped into the room.

"...The Five Barbarian Tribes are presently lawless, arrogant to the extreme. If we don't send out troops this year, then I'm afraid the entire west side of the Great Wall will not be able to hold steady until next year!"

Chancellor Li's voice exclaimed, "But how will we do that, huh?! Why don't you tell us, General Nie—"

"*Chancellor Li*!" Nie Dan's voice was practically an angry roar. "War is upon us! Other than Sichuan, the entirety of the great plains of West Liang is unarmed land! Once the West Song Pass is breached, the Barbarians can march straight on unchallenged!

"Past West Liang is Yushui! And once they cross Yushui, the only natural barrier we'll have left is Mount Xiao. Lan Pass, Zheng Liang Pass, the official northwest highway to Jiangnan… Mount Ke and An Ridge…as well as the two prefectures in the northeast…"

Nie Dan's breathing turned harsh.

"They will all fall under Barbarian control. And if they cross Yellow River," Nie Dan declared, "They *will* invade the capital!"

Not a soul inside the study made a sound. The Emperor's eyes were half-lidded and he appeared unmoved.

"General Nie is exaggerating," a civil official finally said, a long while after. "The Barbarians are *barbarians*. They survive by way of plunder; the many times they've crossed the border is evidence enough. Oftentimes they only pillage; they don't overtake the cities. And after they've robbed everything they need, they retreat back beyond the Wall…"

Many in the crowd muttered their agreement, and Nie Dan clenched his fists, veins faintly bulging on his arms.

Another military officer took a step forward and said coldly, "So Lord Lin, by your words, you mean to say we should open the plains of West Liang for them to rob as they will?!"

Chancellor Li spoke up, "The Jiangnan region is suffering a disastrous flood this year. The southern army is aiding the civilians in rebuilding their homes, draining the floodwater, and reclaiming land. How can they possibly be pulled out and transferred to the northwest? Besides, that means military rations will need to be levied, which would take at least three months. The supply collected from the spring and summer harvests still has not entered the warehouse yet…"

Nie Dan exploded, unable to contain his rage, "Had it not been for the delay in supplying rations to the Goryeo warfront, how would we find ourselves in this predicament today?!"

"Peace, General Nie." Zhao Zhuo stepped forward.

Nie Dan panted heavily, but gradually calmed down.

Zhao Zhuo said to the Emperor, “Father, we cannot allow the Barbarians to continue pillaging West Liang, otherwise this will affect the capital’s grain tax next year for certain. We cannot keep evacuating civilians, either. The staggering number of refugees who have poured into the Central Plains from Yanbian cities in the past year are now causing disturbances.”

Chancellor Li bowed toward the Emperor. “Your Majesty, Your Highness, this subject has an idea.”

Zhao Mao mumbled, but didn’t raise his eyes at all, “Speak. And do not yell anymore, dear ministers. It gives us a headache. Keep your voices down.”

“Pull out fifty thousand men from the Northeast Defense Army, predominantly infantry, and transfer them to General Lan,” Chancellor Li suggested. “Have them intercept the Five Barbarian Tribes outside the Fortress of Pinghuang. General Nie will lead a calvary of ten thousand from the Capital Army to assist accordingly. The Imperial Army will still be led by Captain Tang Hui—”

“No!” Nie Dan disagreed. “The Northeast Defense Army only has a total of eighty thousand men defending Zheng Liang Pass and Yanbian Fortress, and they are to rotate defenses next year. If the Tartars invade southward, what army will we have to stop them? The Capital Army guards the imperial capital and its surroundings; if it’s sent away, only the Imperial Army of eight thousand men will be left—the capital’s defense will be hollow. Who will be responsible if anything should happen?!”

Li Yan cut in, “The new recruits from Jiangnan can gradually be transferred back to the capital. Flood disaster aid doesn’t require too much time. The soldiers of Yi Prefecture and Jiao Prefecture, as well as others in the area, can be moved northward now and join the Capital Army when the time comes. There isn’t a need to worry.”

Zhao Zhuo glanced at Zhao Chao, then nodded in agreement. “San-di can integrate the new troops into the Capital Army. Should there be any movement at the border when the time comes, he can move the garrison to the north shore of Yellow River.”

“The key of this operation is speed,” Chancellor Li said. “As long as General Nie and General Lan can drive out the Barbarians completely

before winter comes, all will be well and the troops can withdraw. Then by spring next year, we can negotiate peace with the Five Barbarian Tribes."

Nie Dan didn't speak, and the Minister of War pushed, "Unless General Nie has a better idea?"

Nie Dan had no choice but to say, "None at the moment."

Zhao Chao deliberated for a moment and spoke up. "Father, this subject and son has a plan."

However, Zhao Mao opened his eyes and said, "There is no need for Chao-er to say more; we shall go with Chancellor Li's plan. My son, you will help coordinate the Ministry of Revenue and the Ministry of War's affairs. Chao-er will take over the management of the Imperial Army and the Capital Army, and their respective deployment. The two of you will need work well together."

Zhao Chao was frowning, but Zhao Mao ignored him and instructed, "All of you are dismissed. Submit your memorials tomorrow during the assembly. Nie Dan and Lan Hong will mobilize the troops tonight; everything must be in order by tomorrow, and we will send the two generals off at tomorrow's assembly."

The officials all took their leave, but Zhao Zhuo eyed You Miao, signaling him to remain in the Imperial Study instead of exiting with the crowd.

After the room was cleared, Zhao Zhuo spoke up. "Father."

Zhao Mao had closed his eyes, and he said, "You are dismissed as well. Take rest early."

Zhao Zhuo was taken aback by the rejection, but he had no choice but to accept it. "This subject and son will take his leave."

You Miao knew Zhao Zhuo and Zhao Chao both had things to say, but Zhao Mao would not allow it. Zhao Zhuo was silent when he exited the Imperial Study. You Miao was waiting at the door, and when he saw him emerge, he bowed.

Zhao Chao and Nie Dan were talking on the other side of the study's garden, and when they saw Zhao Zhuo approach, they didn't shy away.

"San-di," Zhao Zhuo greeted.

"Da-ge." Zhao Chao inclined his head.

"You've worked hard," Zhao Zhuo said.

Zhao Chao nodded. Looking as if something had come to mind, he said, “I want to request someone from da-ge. Army affairs are cumbersome, my plate is too full. Can you lend me You Ziqian for a month?”

Zhao Zhuo started to laugh and peered at You Miao. You Miao froze. He didn’t know what Zhao Chao was thinking, asking Zhao Zhuo for him to his face. It was making him nervous.

Zhao Zhuo asked, “You Ziqian, will you go? If you are willing, then do so. Either way, your assignment papers won’t be issued in the next coming days. Li Yan will be assisting me in managing the affairs of the Ministry of Revenue and the Ministry of War. If you wish to stay with me, that is fine as well. Or perhaps, have Li Yan assist san-di? It will be beneficial to have contacts for communication within the palace.”

Zhao Chao immediately replied, “I am fine with anything.”

You Miao glanced at Li Yan, then answered knowingly, “I daren’t disobey Your Highness’s orders.”

Zhao Chao nodded and waved him over, and You Miao went to him.

Zhao Zhuo chuckled again. “San-di, this time, we must win.”

Zhao Chao smiled. “Rest assured, da-ge.”

The two brothers parted and went their separate ways. Zhao Chao’s face fell as soon as he turned around, and he left the garden of the Imperial Study with You Miao in tow. The palace had already prepared a carriage for him.

“Back to the residence,” Zhao Chao instructed, then the two climbed in.

It was Mid-Autumn night, and the bright moon was particularly round. But instead of feeling admiration for it, all You Miao felt was exhaustion dealing with these people. Every single one of them beat around the bush, talking evasively in cryptic language laden with hidden meanings. He sighed tiredly.

“Did you drink?” Zhao Chao asked. “How are you feeling? You’ve only just recovered from your heatstroke the other day; I was worried the Imperial Study would stifle you.”

You Miao shook his head, then he remarked, “Well, Zhao Zhuo sure is flexible, lending me to you.”

“Do you actually think he’s helping me?” Zhao Chao said. “If he wanted to interrogate you about anything, you think you can say no?”

That's true, You Miao thought. Zhao Zhuo was not a simple character, either—he most likely thought that You Miao was already on Li Yan's side. Who knows what Li Yan had told him in order to prompt this impromptu scheme of planting You Miao by Zhao Chao's side? This hand… Well, Zhao Chao didn't bother to wait for him to bring it up, and simply requested for You Miao directly.

"I've discovered that I don't quite know how to read your brother," You Miao said.

"Now's not the time to play mind games with him," Zhao Cha replied. "Since you're now in my camp, let's just play it by ear and focus on what we need to do. In the future, if he and Father ask, just tell them the truth."

The horse carriage rocked as it traveled. You Miao was still feeling a little weak as he leaned against the window, watching the brightly colored streets and the bustling crowd of Mid-Autumn Night.

Zhao Chao brought You Miao back to his residence, where military officers packed the main hall inside, sitting in a row and waiting for Zhao Chao to return.

"Your Highness!"

"Your Highness…"

When Tang Hui saw You Miao, he nodded to him in greeting. You Miao knew that there was nothing for him to do at the moment, and Zhao Chao most likely wouldn't let him go tonight, so he went out to the yard to hail for a bodyguard.

"Go to the National University's dormitory courtyard. Enter through the back entrance and find a man named Cheng Guangwu. Tell him to deliver some food and tea here, as well as a servant to wait on me."

The bodyguard heeded the order and left. Inside the main hall, Zhao Chao was still engaged in conversations about border matters with the military officers. You Miao moved to the side and began to pour over Zhao Chao's maps. Many of them were vellum maps that illustrated the northern frontier, stretching all the way to the Central Plains. They detailed the locations of mountains and rivers, and went as far as marking where there were forests, plains, hills, and valleys—everything.

You Miao studied the maps as he listened. Zhao Chao disclosed the Emperor's plans, and the military officers were equal parts dismayed and dispirited.

"It's all new recruits that are being transferred here from Jiangnan; how can we fight like this?" a military officer griped.

Another one added, "In the event Nie Dan and Lan Hong's armies aren't enough, they only have the Capital Army to draw from. But when new recruits join the battlefront, they will definitely…"

He trailed off and everyone fell silent.

Zhao Chao was nonchalant, however. "I will submit another appeal during tomorrow's assembly."

"If it doesn't work, then we might as well have all the officials sign a petition!" another suggested.

"No, no, no," Zhao Chao immediately said. "Nie-da-ge might not be held back because of that, so we'll see. I'll call on you guys again if the situation doesn't look good. Go back and make preparations; I'm afraid none of us will be able to rest easy tonight. Go home and give a heads up to your wives and children that the Ministry of War will be calling tonight. At daybreak tomorrow, we will be mobilizing the troops."

The military officers cupped their hands in a salute, then took their leave. Suddenly, the hall was quiet once more.

Flipping through all the maps, You Miao asked from the desk, "You've been preparing all these years?"

Zhao Chao replied without a care, "I refuse to believe I will stay in the capital my entire life. There will come a day when I'll lead a campaign that will avenge my honor."

"Earlier in the Imperial Study, were you going to volunteer to lead an army?" You Miao asked.

Zhao Chao stared at You Miao, unspeaking, his eyes profound with meaning. In the end, he gave a heavy nod.

"But Father won't permit me to go on expeditions," Zhao Chao said. "I want to lead the army to meet the Barbarians encroaching the northwestern checkpoints. The terrain of West Liang is all plains, and my troops are perfect for it—not to mention the Barbarians can't deal with guerilla attacks. But unfortunately, he is still reluctant. Did you talk to him about *that* today?"

You Miao nodded. "I think he was moved by it."

Zhao Chao sighed. "We'll see. I do think he was nicer to me today. Usually, he won't even let me in the Imperial Study to join these meetings."

You Miao hadn't realized Zhao Chao was so lacking in favor. He tried to think of something comforting to say, but came up empty.

Something occurred to Zhao Chao before You Miao could find his own words, and he asked, "Did your teacher ever teach you how to write memorials to the throne?"

"Yes." You Miao bucked up and smiled. "What do you want me to write? Let me do it."

Zhao Chao led You Miao into his study. "No rush. Let's organize a few things first."

That night, Zhao Chao pulled out West Liang's military report along with the detailed analyses of its terrain and military forces. You Miao had learned the art of war with Sun Yu, so it took him no time to understand everything. After studying the particulars with Zhao Chao, You Miao opened a blank Memorial to the Throne and listed one point after another. They talked for an entire night.

"This is all theory, eh? Nothing but war on paper," You Miao said with a grin.

Zhao Chao replied, exasperated, "What you've learned from Sun Yu is more than just theory. We'll just have to do all that we can, and leave the rest to Heaven's Will."

You Miao's writing was immensely more beautiful than Zhao Chao's; the characters he wrote were small and proper and pleasing to the eyes. Referencing Zhao Chao's past memorials to imitate his style, You Miao wrote down nearly a thousand words. The army would be dispatched during this morning's assembly, so in order to affect the Emperor's will, every point would have to be simplified and concise. Otherwise, who would have the energy to read a thousand words during the assembly?

If Zhao Chao succeeded in acquiring military leadership, then parting would be inevitable in the morning. The idea made You Miao a little sad.

Having written for an entire night, by fourth watch, You Miao was plagued by drowsiness. In the end, he sprawled on the desk while Zhao Chao leaned against the window, the two falling fast asleep.

[Chapter 28]

It was the commotion outside that jolted You Miao awake some time later.

"Shaoye, it's morning," Cheng Guangwu said from outside the door.

Zhao Chao was already gone. You Miao sat up and found Zhao Chao's outer robe draped around his shoulders. He had also left a note on the table: "*I'm off to the morning assembly. Stay in my residence for the time being; you can sleep in my room. We'll talk more when I come back.*"

You Miao yawned and emerged from the study. The sun of the eighth month was radiant, but the heat of Indian Summer had already quietly crept away. Within the prince's residence, several boy servants were tidying You Miao's belongings. Yaoguang was organizing things, while Changyuan had gone to clean You Miao's guest room.

"How did I move in, just like that?" You Miao asked. "What about Zhang Wenhan?"

Yaoguang replied, "People from the Third Prince's Residence came to tell us to move. Is shaoye not staying here now? Wenhan will still stay at the National University while he waits for his assignment papers."

Just as well, You Miao thought. Since his belongings had already been moved over, then whatever.

Not a moment later, a butler came over. Respectfully, he said, "His Highness has instructed us to inquire what shaoye wishes to eat for every meal, so the residence can make the necessary arrangements."

"Anything is fine," You Miao said. "I'll be eating with Zhao Chao, so I'll have whatever he's having." A thought struck him, and he added, "Guangwu, go open the money box and bring me two hundred silver."

When Cheng Guangwu came back with the money, You Miao casually handed the bills to the butler. It would take at least three months after the release of the Palace Exam results before his Jinshi assignment, which specified the details of his official position. In those three months, even if he had no official work to do, he still needed to find a place to live in the capital. He couldn't be so thick-skinned as to stick around the Imperial College despite having scored Tanhua, so he might as well stay at Zhao Chao's place…

…Except now that You Miao had handed over the money, it felt as if he was the one supporting Zhao Chao's household instead. The thought amused him. You Miao hadn't managed a household since he returned to Jiangnan; all the money passed through Li Zhifeng's hands. He had no clue how long two hundred silver would last.

Thus, he said, "Come find me when you run out of money."

“Certainly, certainly,” the butler said, and went off to make purchases after receiving the silver bills.

Since Li Zhifeng was back on his mind, You Miao uttered a silent “oh no.” He quickly instructed, “Tell Zhang Wenhan to come over, I’ve some things to say.”

When Zhang Wenhan came, You Miao told him about the new developments at the border. He charged him to make a trip back to Yang Prefecture, to pay respects to his ancestors while he was home, then to remind Li Zhifeng not to take the north road for his return trip to the capital —he must take the south road that passed through Sichuan and West Liang before entering the Central Plains.

Zhang Wenhan nodded at every instruction, then You Miao wrote a letter home for him to take along. When he saw Zhang Wenhan off at the intersection of the west market, they encountered the army setting out. It was high noon by the time You Miao returned to Zhao Chao’s residence, and lunch was served then. After finishing his meal, You Miao’s head hit the pillow and he was out like a light.

Zhao Chao never came back in all that time, and when You Miao woke up, he stayed lazing in bed, wondering where he’d gone. It wasn’t until dusk before there were voices outside; it was Zhao Chao asking after You Miao’s living situation. You Miao finally rolled out of bed then, and got dressed and went out.

Zhao Chao was both tired and hungry. When he saw You Miao approach, he said, “Let’s eat first, I’m pooped.”

You Miao noticed there were four food boxes laid out on the table, and he opened them to glance curiously inside. “Got something good?”

“Dishes granted by Father,” Zhao Chao replied. “I’m starving, starving. Eat first, talk later.”

The butler set out the rice, and Changyuan stood behind You Miao to serve the meal.

Zhao Chao grinned. “Heh. Well, your boy servants are certainly nicely cleaned up, looking prim and proper.”

You Miao laughed. “Why were you back so late? What was discussed during the morning assembly?”

Zhao Chao had grown accustomed to living in the army, so when he ate, he didn’t follow any etiquette. He used a large bowl out of habit,

shoveling food down his throat and stuffing his face as he saw fit. He gave You Miao an account of events as he chowed down.

Early morning, when Zhao Chao left for the assembly, the memorial You Miao put together was still fresh with ink. After the Emperor had read through it, he deliberated for a long time while the officials heatedly argued. In the end, Zhao Mao did not grant Zhao Chao an army, though he did adopt many of his suggestions—one of which was to plant an ambush on Tucheng Hill of West Liang. The plan would be to seal the Barbarian army's escape routes on the west side of the Great Wall and trap them on this side of the border. The civilians from the towns and villages there would be evacuated, and all provisions cleared. This would mean that even when the Barbarians successfully seized their target, they would gain nothing. Moreover, they would end up cornered.

Nie Dan entered court to receive his military command, and after the assembly was over, he left immediately for the expedition, taking twenty thousand men of the Capital Army with him. Lan Hong, the other general, went northward alone to maneuver the defense troops. Just when Zhao Chao was lamenting the hopelessness of ever going into battle, Zhao Mao surprisingly invited him to stay for lunch together.

Surprised and overwhelmed by the unexpected favor, Zhao Chao stayed in the palace for lunch. During the meal, the father and son talked about the border, about military operations, and other such subjects. Zhao Chao was given the chance to voice his thoughts on these matters.

Zhao Mao was choked up with mixed emotions, as he seemed to have remembered many affairs of the past. He even brought up the subject of Zhao Chao's mother, Imperial Consort Wang, who had passed away many years ago.

Ever since Zhao Chao's defeat in the war against Goryeo three years ago, escaping back to the capital after suffering heavy casualties, Zhao Mao stopped caring whether this son lived or died. They had lost so gravely, and were forced to pay an indemnity of silver and silk to negotiate peace—and never mind the loss of dignity. It had caused Zhao Mao to vent all of his anger on Zhao Chao. Now that Zhao Mao had remembered the past, he finally toned down his ire. He told Zhao Chao to remain at the capital to guard it, and to properly manage the Capital Army.

"Train yourself," he had said, "And don't rush into battle again."

Zhao Chao said derisively, “I was still too impatient.”

“Well, no matter what, let’s just observe the situation for now,” You Miao consoled him. “If Nie Dan ends up needing reinforcements, we can submit more memorials then.”

Zhao Chao nodded. His eyes were bloodshot and he was so sleepy he could barely talk anymore, so he went to bed early.

Since that day, You Miao lived in Zhao Chao’s residence, aiding him in managing military affairs. Nie Dan wasn’t even gone for half a month and military reports were rolling in southward like snowballs, their contents greatly alarming and terrifying You Miao when he read through them. There were casualties every day; the plains were not conducive to guerrilla warfare, and when the Five Barbarian Tribes clashed head-on with Lan Hong’s army, they immediately broke up and adopted the mobile cavalry tactic of divide and strike to fight the Han army.

The weather was gradually cooling, and You Miao was counting the days. Pulled muscles and broken bones took a hundred days to mend; seventh month, eighth month, ninth month…it had been three months, so Li Zhifeng should’ve recovered by now. But he didn’t dare to have Li Zhifeng come to the capital at this time. He sent Yaoguang back to Jiangnan to pass on the message to tell those in Liu Prefecture not to bother hurrying their travel to the capital. However, on the day Yaoguang was to depart, the newest military report arrived: the three northeast highways of Yanbian and Zheng Liang Pass had fallen to the enemy!

You Miao was dumbstruck.

“Shaoye, I’ll take the south road, not the north road. It’d take a bit longer, but I’m sure I can reach Liu Prefecture without problems,” Yaoguang assured him.

“The south road is dangerous, too,” You Miao said. “The south road passes through West Liang to enter Sichuan, and West Liang is currently an active battleground. How *can* you cross it?”

Yaoguang was adamant so You Miao considered the option further. His own boy servants had studied martial arts for years with Li Zhifeng, and while they weren’t as skilled, self-defense shouldn’t be an issue.

It was with apprehension that You Miao at last gave in and let Yaoguang go, but only after he sternly instructed him that he must tell everyone in Jiangnan and Jiangbei to take the south road instead of the

north, since their safety would be uncertain if the north should also fall into chaos.

Once the boy was gone, an entire month passed and still there wasn't any news, nor letters.

Civilians continuously fled south from the north, and even those from Ji Prefecture in the north who weren't as close to the border had escaped to the Central Plains with their whole families. With every new wave of migrants, they brought fresh news—the Barbarians were encroaching further and further, inching ever closer to the capital.

On the twentieth of the tenth month, the court received the newest report from the frontlines: the Tartars had breached Ji Prefecture's defense.

Everyone was thrown into a panic.

That day, You Miao was practicing archery in the courtyard. Although he hadn't touched weapons or trained for half a year, he still managed to hit the target when he picked up a bow and arrow. He'd just pulled the bowstring when Zhao Chao rushed through the door.

"Quick, bring the army registers with you and follow me to the palace for a meeting."

You Miao immediately put away the bow and arrows and went with Zhao Chao. He could tell everyone around was frantic and on edge.

"Didn't things stabilize a few days ago?" he asked.

Zhao Chao gave You Miao a look. After deliberating for a moment, he said, his voice a little shaky, "Don't let this news out yet."

You Miao nodded.

Zhao Chao breathed in deeply, and said after a pause, "General Lan was sacrificed. He died in battle."

You Miao was stunned.

"...What about Nie-da-ge?" he asked, feeling chills down his spine.

Back when he was still a student in Liu Prefecture, Sun Yu had once said that with the two generals Lan Hong and Nie Dan defending the east and west of the Great Wall respectively, twenty years of peace at the frontier could be assured. But now, Lan Hong was dead?!

"Nie-da-ge is currently maneuvering the troops, integrating General Lan's remnant soldiers into his army to resist the Tartars," Zhao Chao said. "With Lan Hong dead, the entire northern defense has fallen. This time, I really might have to go into battle."

You Miao had never expected to join the battlefield so quickly. Lan Hong had been sacrificed—how could that be?

"When?" You Miao asked.

"You don't have to follow the army. I'll send you back to Liu Prefecture first thing tomorrow morning."

You Miao was instantly furious. "What do you mean?"

"This isn't up to you! You will obey me!" Zhao Chao hissed, his emotions a little out of control.

"..."

Zhao Chao panted while You Miao stared at him, neither of them budging.

Zhao Chao broke the silence a moment later. "Never mind, we can discuss that later. The news only just came in. Lan Hong's death has derailed all the deployment plans!"

He explained as they walked down the palace corridors. As it turned out, Lan Hong had assembled his forces in the west to aid the northern defense as soon as the Tartars invaded. But with the army pulled out of the west, the plains of West Liang were immediately defenseless. Nie Dan and Lan Hong thus clashed over the resistance route; Nie Dan had told Lan Hong to retreat to the south and guard the south shore of Yellow River, and wait for the Capital Army's reinforcements. He was insistent on having Tang Hui lead the Imperial Army northward instead, because if Lan Hong were to fight the Tartars on his own, he would be facing attack on two fronts for certain.

However, Lan Hong grossly overestimated his own abilities and turned his south-marching troops northward to Zheng Liang Pass. While on route halfway up Mount Languan, he was suddenly ambushed by both the Tartars and the Jies. Lan Hong suffered grave casualties, and he himself was shot dead by an arrow. The Lieutenant General Wang Xin had attempted to retaliate by using the soldiers' grief to boost their morale, but the Tartars had quickly retreated after dealing their blow.

Presently, Wang Xin had retreated to the north shore of Yellow River with the intention of engaging in battle with his back facing the waters. The current situation was critical to the extreme, and when Zhao Chao and You Miao arrived at Taihe Hall, all the officials were there, engaged in heated discussions. However, Zhao Mao was absent from the throne. Only Zhao

Zhuo was there, standing in the center-front of the hall, frowning with his brows deeply furrowed.

"The soldiers are outside the city now," Zhao Chao reported. "There are about fifty-four thousand men transferred here from Yang Prefecture."

"Where is General Tang Hui?" Zhao Zhuo asked.

Tang Hui took a step forward and bowed. "This lowly general is present."

You Miao's stomach dropped and he immediately blurted, "No!"

Although You Miao had never led an army, he was familiar with army designations. Zhao Chao was, too. Tang Hui led the Imperial Army, whose purpose was to guard and escort the monarchy; their emphasis was on defense, not offense, so how could the Imperial Army be sent to the frontlines? Zhao Zhuo had barely spoken, and You Miao could guess what he and the officials were planning—they must be thinking of having Tang Hui integrate the Imperial Army with Lan Hong's remnant troops to form one force and march northward to face the enemy.

But the Imperial Army must absolutely *not* do this!

You Miao's accidental exclamation had everyone in the hall staring at him, and he quickly mentally checked himself. As a subject without an official position, this was already an overstep of his status. Even if he'd had a position, it was nowhere near his turn to speak.

"This subject spoke carelessly. This subject deserves to die a million deaths," You Miao apologized.

Zhao Zhuo smiled it off and didn't pursue the issue further. Zhao Chao, however, spoke up.

In a loud and clear voice, he said, "The Imperial Army is not suitable for moving northward. The terrain of Yellow River's north shore is complex, and the Imperial Army isn't trained to face guerilla warfare. General Tang Hui is still best suited for guarding the capital and surrounding areas."

Chancellor Li replied, "If the Imperial Army cannot move to the frontlines, then we'll have no choice but to assign the new recruits to the Northern Frontier Army. But General Tang Hui—"

"Let me lead the army, and have Tang Hui remain in the capital," Zhao Chao cut in.

Silence blanketed the hall. A long time after, Chancellor Li advised, "Your Highness, the new recruits are disorderly and difficult to manage. Now, with the Capital Army pulled, there really are only eight thousand men of the Imperial Army left to defend the capital. In this subject's view… it's still better to…"

He trailed off, not finishing his sentence, and one could almost hear a pin drop in the room.

"San-di," Zhao Zhuo said at last. "Can you win? The entire capital—one hundred thousand people, and their families' lives—will be in your hands."

Zhao Chao's pupils slowly contracted, and You Miao felt his own heart stop. Almost as though he could read Zhao Chao's mind, he knew in that moment Zhao Chao had lost courage.

"Yes, I can," Zhao Chao answered. "Huang-xiong[50] needn't worry."

Zhao Zhuo shook his head languidly with a smile, eyeing him hard—as if he'd seen through him.

You Miao inwardly sighed.

"Well, then," Zhao Zhuo said, "San-di will remain in the capital and take charge of the Imperial Army. General Tang will lead the new Capital Army recruits northward and take over the remnants of Lan Hong's Northern Frontier Army. General, you will have a hundred thousand men; you must drive the Tartars out of the Central Plains."

Tang Hui bowed. "This lowly general has received the command."

This time, Zhao Chao didn't object. Everyone in the palace knew—and You Miao even more so—that Zhao Chao had lost again, and it wasn't to Zhao Zhuo. It was to himself.

"You Ziqian, stay," Zhao Zhuo ordered. "Everything else will be discussed during tomorrow's morning assembly."

The officials took their leave, one after the other, while Zhao Zhuo gestured for You Miao to follow him. Thus, with the stack of army registers that never came to use in his arms, You Miao followed Zhao Zhuo out of the hall, crossing through the Imperial Garden to head toward the Imperial Study.

When they passed by the Palace of Changle, clouds of smoke surrounded the building, and the faint chanting voices of Taoist priests

could be heard. You Miao was a little curious and cast a glance in that direction, but Zhao Zhuo stopped him with a wag of his finger. You Miao frowned.

"Originally, your official posts weren't supposed to be assigned until the coming spring." Zhao Zhuo entered a side hall, washed his hands, and said impassively, "But now with the war at the frontier having become so critical, the assignments for the top three will be issued early. Do excuse this affront."

This meant You Miao was about to be assigned a position, and he quickly said, "Thank you, Your Highness, for your grace."

Zhao Zhuo smiled, but he didn't say more on the subject. Instead, he said, "You must have been exhausted lately. My little brother has always been stubborn since he was small; once he's set his mind to something, he won't budge until he breaks his head."

It wasn't You Miao's place to comment on Zhao Chao, so he only smiled in response.

Zhao Zhuo handed him a small case, and said, "This is your family's tribute tea. Let's brew a pot."

You Miao happily took the case. The tea inside was the previous year's Sunshower Qingfeng.

Zhao Zhuo continued, "Now that all six roads to Jiangnan are closed off, we will have to wait until next year for more tea, so drink it sparingly."

You Miao made a noise of acknowledgment. Being with Zhao Zhuo felt so very different from being with Zhao Chao. You Miao understood now why the court supported Zhao Zhuo—he certainly did have some ability under his belt. A man like Zhao Zhuo might not be genuine, but when interacting with him, the impression he gave was always pleasant regardless of what he really thought deep down. There was no fear of saying the wrong thing, either. Zhao Chao's emotions were too turbulent, and while they were still considerably well-concealed in front of other officials, he was like a child who couldn't grow up when he hung around You Miao. He was more genuine, but more capricious at the same time.

You Miao picked out a glass teapot, and its clear body misted over when boiling water was poured into it. He waited until the haze had faded some before sprinkling a pinch of the Sunshower Qingfeng leaves in.

Zhao Zhuo was slightly surprised. "You know how to do this?"

You Miao smiled, and said as he tipped the glass teapot to pour tea into a cup, “Sunshower Qingfeng has to be brewed like this to taste good. The water can’t be too hot or too cold. Eighty percent hot is the perfect temperature for a pot of perfect tea.”

Zhao Zhuo took a sip, then his expression brightened into an appreciative smile.

“Earlier in the palace, it wasn’t that I did not want you to speak,” Zhao Zhuo said. “But the court officials were present.”

“This subject understands,” You Miao replied.

Zhao Zhuo gave a slight nod. “I figured you did as well, very quickly. It’s fine as long as you remember going forward. Now, why don’t you tell me what you had wanted to say during the assembly today?”

You Miao watched Zhao Zhuo contemplatively, but Zhao Zhuo didn’t mind. He commanded, “I am letting you speak, so speak.”

“His Highness the Third Prince should be allowed to lead the army,” You Miao thus said.

Zhao Zhuo grinned. “What?”

After careful consideration, You Miao elaborated, “None of the strategies the court officials formulated the other day are useful now. At the beginning, Chancellor Li had mentioned that the operation needed to be fast, but we are entering winter and General Nie is powerless in ending the war before spring next year. We have to be prepared to fight all winter.”

Zhao Zhuo nodded thoughtfully, and You Miao added, “Besides, Nie Dan doesn’t have enough men. Since the situation has changed, our strategy must change accordingly.”

“But what you don’t know…” Zhao Zhuo took a sip of tea, then explained unhurriedly, “…Is that the Barbarians will not be passing winter within our borders. They will go back beyond the Wall when winter comes.”

“But what if they *don’t* go back?” You Miao countered. “It’s precisely because everyone thinks that the Tartars and the Five Barbarian Tribes will go back beyond the Wall after they’ve pillaged enough that we time and time again lose the lead on offense, and confine ourselves to defense.”

Zhao Zhuo sighed, not saying a word. For the moment, the two focused on the tea leaves floating and sinking inside the glass teapot, neither of them speaking. You Miao knew Zhao Zhuo had now understood

what he was trying to say. Since the beginning, the imperial court never took this war seriously. Of course, You Miao also understood that part of the reason was that the government had no money. With consecutive annual deficits, the Goryeo war, and the southern flood disaster on top of that, Tianqi was at its limit in disbursing military rations.

It they couldn't assemble the army, then they could only be at the mercy of others.

The only way to solve all this was to actively strike their enemy. However, Tang Hui's military command was restricted by the imperial court; his every move had to follow court orders. Only Zhao Chao entering the battlefield could resolve all the problems at once, but no one at court would give him the power. There was no other reason—the defeat Zhao Chao suffered three years ago in Goryeo was precisely caused by his inability to handle the new recruits. No one could be certain he wouldn't repeat the same mistakes again. Even Zhao Chao himself didn't have the courage to take on the heavy burden.

"What do you think of my san-di?" Zhao Zhuo asked, sounding rather amused.

"..."

You Miao knew why Zhao Zhuo asked him this question, and it certainly indicated that Zhao Zhuo saw him as one of his own. But You Miao didn't know how to answer, since it felt as if anything he said would be wrong.

"His Highness…" You Miao said after careful consideration, "Has the bearing of a great commander."

Zhao Zhuo didn't show whether he approved of the answer and only quirked an eyebrow at You Miao. You Miao quickly supplied an explanation.

"A commander is valuable in their self-awareness; knowing what battles they can fight and who they cannot defeat. They do not behave aggressively out of bravado, that is the way of a general. But His Highness's ability in the area is…uh, still rather insufficient. Maybe with time, he'll have…he'll have…"

"Hm." Zhao Zhuo's response was ambiguous. He casually picked up the data sheets You Miao had brought, and asked absently, "Did he order you to compile all this?"

“Yes,” You Miao replied.

Zhao Zhuo flipped through a few of the pages. Most of the information was about personnel assignment and transfers within the Capital Army, so he didn’t care to look at it more. As he stacked the register he had back on the pile, he said, “He still needs more practice. I am not at ease giving him control of the main forces.”

You Miao and Zhao Zhuo exchanged a smile, maintaining the silence. Zhao Zhuo chatted with him a bit more before suddenly asking, “What do you think of Li Yan?”

“Very smart,” You Miao replied without skipping a beat.

Still with the same smiling eyes, Zhao Zhuo looked at him, seeming to be expecting a follow-up statement. And not to disappoint, You Miao of course had more to say.

“No one was ever able to control him, not since he was young. A smart person often insists on having their own way.”

Zhao Zhuo nodded. “You will take on the position of Imperial Censor for the time being, and observe my father’s edict to follow the army and audit as you see fit. The Capital Army is now handed to you.”

You Miao quickly bowed to express his gratitude, and Zhao Zhuo added, “It’s not easy being an Army Censor, but I know my little brother. Those he is willing to listen to can say anything to him—the only issue being whether you dare to speak.”

You Miao immediately replied, “This subject will certainly do his utmost to fulfill Your Highness’s expectations.”

Finally, Zhao Zhuo said, chuckling, “It is my father who assigned you the position. You will have to enforce military discipline and communicate any dealings. Voice what you must to my little brother. And remember, cowardice and bending the law for personal interest is forbidden.”

You Miao nodded continuously at the biddings, and Zhao Zhuo gave him another speech of encouragement before dismissing him.

Hugging the stack of memorials and army registers as he headed out, You Miao passed by the Palace of Changle again. He peered at it curiously for longer this time. The eunuch leading the way for him knew he was greatly favored by the Crown Prince, so he didn’t interfere. Either way, none of the eunuchs were strangers to what Zhao Mao did in the palace.

You Miao saw the Emperor of Tianqi standing before an altar outside the Palace of Changle. He was wearing a seven-starred Taoist cap and holding a jade ceremonial tablet in his hands, making a great show of his earnestness as he recited a prayer. Beside him was the newly appointed Bangyan Cheng Qing, who was burning talismans in the fire as smoke swirled around them.

You Miao recognized the ritual they were conducting; Sun Yu had also mentioned it before in the past. It was called "Verdant Verse," and was something Taoists seeking immortality loved doing. The Verdant Verse was a prayer written for Taoist deities like the Highest Elder Lord and the Heavenly Emperor. The prayer was burnt after it was written, in the hopes that the wishes therein would be heard by Heaven.

Once upon a time, the Emperor had also ordered Sun Yu to compose such a prayer—for no other reason than the fact that Sun Yu had beautiful writing. However, Sun Yu had always found the Emperor's search for immortality repulsive. He berated the Emperor's disgraceful act of disregarding the people in favor of spirits, and the two had a huge fight that ended on a sour note. You Miao was also conflicted by the sight: a grand nation was in the midst of war, but the ruler didn't care at all and was instead cultivating immortality with the new Bangyan… Absolutely outrageous.

"Lord Tanhua?" the eunuch carefully prompted You Miao. You Miao knew he couldn't look on much longer and followed him to leave the palace.

Unable to resist, You Miao asked as they walked, "Has His Majesty not attended court in the past few days?"

"His Majesty is praying for the wellbeing of the millions of civilians in the northern border," the eunuch answered. "Praying that our Tianqi soldiers will return victorious."

You Miao showed a disapproving expression. The Crown Prince had appointed him an Imperial Censor, so he had to act all righteous, but the genuine concern he had deep down would not disperse. Even after he had returned to Zhao Chao's residence, his face was still stormy.

There was a horse-drawn carriage waiting for him in the yard when You Miao returned to the Prince's Residence, and as soon as he walked through the door, the butler rushed inside to announce his arrival.

“Young Master You has returned!”

You Miao passed off the registers to a boy servant, and he said as he entered the main hall, “Zhao Chao, I got appointed the—”

“Why did you only return now?!” Zhao Chao angrily demanded; his brows locked in a deep furrow.

The moment Zhao Chao spotted You Miao, he went over and wrapped You Miao in a fur mantle, catching him a little unaware.

Bewildered, You Miao said, “Let’s talk in the study? What are you doing? Wait! I just came back…”

But Zhao Chao wasn’t listening. “Where’s the hat?” he demanded the servants. “Bring me the hat!”

“Where are we going?”

You Miao was utterly confused as Zhao Chao forced him to put on his coat without so much as an explanation and pushed him onto the carriage outside in the yard. Cheng Guangwu was the driver, and they left the prince’s residence through the back entrance. You Miao was baffled.

Zhao Chao grabbed a cloth bag and put it on You Miao’s lap. “I’ve got the travel permit for you, and this here is my personal seal,” he said as he showed You Miao a seal made of lantian jade. Upon it was carved with the words *Third Prince Zhao Chao.* “Take it. If you run into any Tianqi soldiers, just show them the papers and you’ll be able to pass. If that doesn’t work, show them the personal seal. If you lose the permit, then draw up another one yourself—”

“Wait!” You Miao exclaimed, finally sensing something amiss. “Where are you making me go?”

“Out of the city!” Zhao Chao replied. “The north road is now closed off. If the capital falls, then it won’t be safe here either!”

You Miao suddenly realized the severity of the situation. “Is the war situation that serious now? Don’t go just yet! Let me off the carriage!”

The carriage was just passing Xuanzhenghe Lane where the six ministries were situated. Zhao Chao argued impatiently, “You have to go! I’m ordering you to leave the city tonight. And when you reach the official highway, take the south route. Cross Sichuan and take the ferry to Jiangnan when you reach Baling…”

You Miao was stunned speechless, and he fell back on his seat and started to laugh. Zhao Chao stared at You Miao, his brows deeply furrowed.

“Don’t be silly, I can’t leave,” You Miao said at last.

“You *must* leave!” Zhao Chao shouted.

“I was just appointed an Imperial Censor! How can you have me leave?!” You Miao shouted back.

“Is your life more important, or is your official position more important?!” Zhao Chao yelled angrily.

You Miao yelled right back, “Is the survival of the country more important than one life?!”

Zhao Chao was speechless. He had never thought You Miao would yell at him, and was stunned for the moment. You Miao thought his astonished expression was hilarious and couldn’t help but point at him and laugh.

“Guangwu, to the Ministry of Personnel,” You Miao ordered. “I need to pick up my assignment papers.”

Zhao Chao seized You Miao by the collar and hissed, “I’m not joking with you, You Ziqian. The Tartars have already reached the Yellow River. If Tang Hui can’t hold them back, the capital will fall. When that time comes, the capital will have to relocate… You *must* go back first, or else when hell breaks loose, if anything should happen to you, you… I…”

“I’m not joking with you either, Zhao Chao,” You Miao replied seriously. “Your brother just appointed me to a position today. If the Imperial Censor runs back to Jiangnan before the battle’s even started, my entire family will be screwed!”

“You don’t have to worry about Zhao Zhuo!” Zhao Chao exclaimed. “I’ll go find Father, and after the fighting’s over, you can still come back to the capital to be an official…”

You Miao was instantly offended. Space was tight inside the coach, and the two were squished sitting together. Needing to express his indignation, he slapped Zhao Chao across the face.

“I’ve come all this *fucking* way to the capital, and you think it’s to be an *official*?!” he angrily yelled.

Zhao Chao was stunned, and You Miao shouted again, “Cheng Guangwu! Stop this carriage!”

Cheng Guangwu pulled the horses to a stop and You Miao hopped out of the coach. It was late dusk by then, and it had flurried the day before. Sunset had dyed the long street into a shade of dark yellow. You Miao had

no clue where he was, but he stalked forward nonetheless, so angry with Zhao Chao that he was shaking.

"You Miao!" a voice cried from behind him.

Still wearing a stormy face, he continued to march in the snow without looking back. Zhao Chao chased after him and shouted again.

"You Ziqian! Wait up!"

Zhao Chao caught up and reached out, making a grab for You Miao's shoulder. But You Miao moved faster and took a step back, soundlessly swinging a fist out of his sleeve. Zhao Chao immediately blocked his blow and, both using the momentum of each other's arm, they pushed and broke away from each other.

"Good skills." Zhao Chao frowned. "That Quanrong bodyguard of yours taught you?"

You Miao didn't answer, only glowering at Zhao Chao. Zhao Chao was about to say something else when You Miao had had enough and blew a fuse. He spun around and kicked him.

"You think I'm here to be an official?" You Miao spat angrily. "What do you take me for? If not for you, who would want to come to the capital?! As soon as something happens, you make me run away. If I go back like this, how will I face my teacher?!"

Zhao Chao gazed at him for a moment, then said, "I'm not making you run away. I'm just scared that if things turn violent, I won't be able to protect you."

"I'm not leaving," You Miao said firmly. "I was just appointed Army Censor, so if you don't want me to get you in trouble, you'll never speak of this again."

Zhao Chao snorted and laughed out loud. You Miao was livid at his reaction and he eyed him frostily.

"If not for my sake, then at the very least, for the sake of that Quanrong slave of yours, no?" Zhao Chao reasoned.

You Miao was instantly silenced—Zhao Chao had struck his weakness.

Zhao Chao's valiant brows were tightly knitted, his eyes bearing a trace of sadness. "Go back, Ziqian. You'll be able to help, even at home. The news I received is that the capital might be relocating, and if that happens, the move will surely be southward. Go back to Yang Prefecture

first. That way, you'll be able to help when the capital carries out the large-scale move."

You Miao was actually wavering now, not because of what Zhao Chao said, but for Li Zhifeng's sake.

Zhao Chao was doing everything in his power to send him home in order to protect him; You Miao knew that. Unfortunately for Zhao Chao, You Miao had come to the capital full of ambitions. As the imperially-designated Tanhua, if he ran away when the nation was in trouble, how could he face Sun Yu when he returned? But for Li Zhifeng's sake, he had to keep himself safe and sound. You Miao was troubled now, unsure of what to do. He couldn't imagine how Li Zhifeng would react if he should die.

"That slave of yours," Zhao Chao suddenly said, "He will definitely go fight to the death on the frontlines if the Tartars or the Barbarians killed you. If you don't go back to Jiangnan, won't you worry that he'll think you're dead and confront the Tartars with his life?"

This was the last straw that finally made You Miao nod.

"Though it is true that I didn't think about the issue with your teacher," Zhao Chao admitted, "how about this: stay for today. In three days, I will make other arrangements. Father will go down to Jiangnan regardless, so just go with him. It'd be the perfect reason to go back. That way, Sun Yu won't be able to say anything."

"All right," You Miao said helplessly. At this point, what more could he say?

Zhao Chao sighed. His face bore the red mark of You Miao's strike, and suddenly, You Miao felt a little guilty.

"Sorry," he said.

Zhao Chao laughed it off, looking faintly forlorn. Who knows whether he was laughing at You Miao or at himself. You Miao felt guilty, so he obediently followed Zhao Chao back to the prince's residence. However, as soon as they returned, they saw Yaoguang standing there waiting for them in the courtyard.

Knowing he was here to deliver mail, You Miao quickly asked, "How are things at home?"

Yaoguang looked a little glum, and You Miao wondered despairingly, *How come every time he comes, it's always to deliver bad news and never*

good? His name wasn't well-picked; I'll have to tell Qiao Jue to give him a better one next time I see him.

Sure enough, Yaoguang said, "Li Zhifeng is already on the road. He left two days after me."

You Miao was baffled by the news. He asked urgently, "Did he take the north or the south road?"

"Butler Li took the north road," Yaoguang replied. "Lord Uncle didn't know what was happening then. This time, he had me take the south road."

The north road was the route that covered Zheng Liang Pass and Yanbian! It should've only taken ten days on an urgent horse! The last time Li Zhifeng went back to Jiangnan, he took less than half a month, so why was he still not here yet?

"The north road is closed off," Zhao Chao said, "Not even military reports can make it through. The Tartars won't dare to mess with the Quanrong, though, so relax. He might have detoured around to East Liang Pass. Don't worry, Ziqian!"

You Miao was feeling a little faint.

"Let's talk inside instead of standing here," Zhao Chao said.

The series of events taking place all at the same time were overwhelming You Miao; too much had happened today. First, the old Emperor wanted to flee, and what did this imply? It implied that the Tartars had already reached the shores of Yellow River. If Tang Hui couldn't hold them back, then the great Barbarian army would invade the capital from all sides. The court officials all knew privately what the old Emperor meant by escape—once the capital was in danger, the only option left was to relocate it.

The Crown Prince appointed him to the position of Army Censor, which also meant that he was to stay in the capital alongside him and Zhao Chao. The old Emperor could flee, but Zhao Zhuo and the Third Prince could not. You Miao hadn't yet reached a rank high enough to attend court assemblies, and he had been staying by Zhao Chao's side recently, rarely leaving his residence. When he thought about it, the morning assembly must have been plagued by a state of panic. Everything was about to get completely out of control.

And what was worse, Li Zhifeng was already on his way to the capital!

"Are there any other roads that lead to the capital?" You Miao asked.

Zhao Chao gestured for him to look at the map, and then pointed to the area north of the Great Wall. You Miao could also read maps—after all, he was practically living with maps and army maneuvers lately. Since Li Zhifeng took the north road and would've left East Liang Pass by now, then it would be too late for him to turn around to take the south road. The only possibility of getting to the capital would be to go beyond the border through the Fortress of Yanbian—which the Tartars had occupied—and go along the Great Wall. It would be a detour of over a thousand miles, a road that twisted and winded before turning westward and re-entering the border through Yanmeng Pass of West Liang.

Under the circumstances, You Miao had no choice but to remain in the capital to wait for Li Zhifeng. Otherwise, if he went home on his own and Li Zhifeng came to the capital only to miss him after detouring all that way around the Great Wall, the consequences would be doubly severe.

"He's a Quanrong," Zhao Chao said. "The Quanrong have always been experts of the land outside of the border; they're familiar with the terrain north of the Great Wall by the age of ten. You don't need to worry about him."

"I'm not going back anymore," You Miao declared.

Zhao Chao frowned. "No! I'll keep him here in the capital, and you can leave a letter for him—"

"If the capital really does move and the messenger you designate has never met Li Zhifeng before, how will he find him?" You Miao said, cutting Zhao Chao off. "And worse, if the Tartars invade and everyone in the capital is dead, what will you do then?"

"*Pain in the ass*," Zhao Chao muttered under his breath, his brows locked in a deep furrow.

"I will stay in the capital to wait for him," You Miao said firmly.

"All right." Zhao Chao inhaled deeply, knowing that with the circumstances as they stood, the best decision really was to have You Miao stay. As long as Tang Hui could hold steady, everything should work out.

Zhao Chao was scared, but You Miao was even more so. If Li Zhifeng came and the entire capital was already occupied by the Barbarians, and he thought You Miao was dead…he would completely lose his mind for sure. You Miao didn't even dare to imagine what that'd be like. He must stay in the capital—at all costs.

[Chapter 29]

That night, You Miao went to the Ministry of Personnel on his own to collect his assignment papers, then went to the Ministry of War to pick up his seal. Inside the carriage on the way back, he was overtaken by extremely complicated feelings. He was now a man with a government position—an honor he'd never thought he'd attain three years ago. But behind this honor was innumerous perils.

"Shaoye," Cheng Guangwu asked from the driver's seat. "Are we heading back to the prince's residence?"

"No," You Miao said decisively. "To Chancellor Li's house."

When You Miao arrived at Li Yan's house, however, the man wasn't there. The house servant said manneredly, "Young master is out."

Watching how the servants in the Li Residence were packing, You Miao got an idea of what was happening. He asked, "Is your master going somewhere?"

The house servant didn't dare answer, and so You Miao knew that Chancellor Li must have heard word too, and was going to join the old Emperor in his Tour to the South.

"Where did Li Yan go?" he asked.

"Young master didn't say. He went out with the second butler at nightfall," the house servant replied. "Perhaps You-shaoye would like to come inside for some tea?"

When You Miao heard this, he knew exactly where Li Yan had gone. "To Tingyu Pavilion," he instructed Cheng Guangwu.

Upon arrival at Tingyu Pavilion, You Miao spotted Li Yan's carriage parked just outside. He went over and unapologetically pulled the window curtains aside, but the one sitting inside was Li Yan's butler. The butler made to climb out of the coach at the sight of You Miao, but You Miao only waved dismissively and went straight inside the building in search of Li Yan, who was currently patronizing prostitutes.

The madam of the brothel had an expression of cheer plastered on her face as she welcomed him in, but You Miao stopped her.

"I'm here to look for someone," he said, then hiked up to the second floor with familiarity.

When a brothel worker saw which room You Miao was targeting, however, his face dropped and frantically tried to stop him. "Sir, please do

not go any further. There's a VIP inside…"

"It's fine, I just have some things to say to him… Move aside," You Miao demanded.

Several more workers came to hold You Miao back, and Li Yan's angry voice shouted from inside the room, "Make him wait outside—"

Before he finished, however, You Miao had already kicked open the door. Startled, the girls dodged aside. Li Yan was just about to blow up, but when he saw that it was You Miao who'd come, he forcibly swallowed his ire. He dismissed Liu Shaling, the girl beside him, and gestured You Miao to come over.

You Miao mocked him instead. "An imperially-appointed official frolicking in the brothels while the country's in dire straits. What a disgrace."

Li Yan snorted. "Got *your* position? Come show me your official seal."

"I only just collected it today at the Ministry of Personnel," You Miao said, passing him the seal. "His Highness the Crown Prince is having me take on the position of Army Censor. Even though I was ready to drop being an official today…"

"What do you mean?" Li Yan asked, a little surprised.

Liu Shaling pulled the door closed behind her, leaving only Li Yan and You Miao in the room. And so, You Miao told Li Yan about how Zhao Chao was trying to make him leave the capital. He knew that this was not a big deal, but his aim in coming here tonight was clear—to discreetly find out more about the capital relocation. As expected, Li Yan didn't say anything, and only listened as he sipped on his tea. When he heard that Zhao Chao tried to send You Miao home, he grew outraged and almost started to chew You Miao out.

"Is promotion and money more important, or is that Quanrong slave of yours more important?" Li Yan furiously demanded.

You Miao whined at him, "Well I'm still here, aren't I?"

But while that was what he said, inwardly, he griped, *Well, where the fuck were you guys back when Dad threw me out to Riverwave Estate, huh? Wasn't Li Zhifeng the only one who stayed with me?*

"Let me just say," Li Yan said coldly, "that at the very least, based on the cardinal virtues of humanity, justice, propriety, wisdom, and filial piety

that your teacher taught you, now is the time when the nation needs capable men. There's no reason to pack up and flee."

"I wasn't going!" You Miao protested.

Li Yan said disdainfully, "So Zhao Chao only has so much resolve; I guess I overestimated him. Let me tell you, You Ziqian…"

Li Yan lowered his voice and yanked You Miao over, hissing darkly by his ear.

"You think I ain't scared? But now is absolutely not the time to run. Our lives and everything we hold dear is on Tang Hui's shoulders now. If we stay in the capital, as long as we make it past this crisis, then we'll be promoted and granted nobility—our futures will be infinite. We have to bet on this, if nothing else. You understand?"

You Miao was finally able to coax the truth out of him, and he immediately asked, "And your dad, the ministers of the six ministries—are they all leaving?"

"He's leaving. I'm staying," Li Yan replied nonchalantly.

You Miao continued to ask, "What about everyone else? Are they migrating?"

Li Yan gave him an enigmatic look, then shook his head slowly. You Miao understood that this meant not even Li Yan knew for sure. He sighed in spite of himself.

"Go home now. Go back and follow Zhao Chao," Li Yan instructed. "Now's not the time to bother with him. Even the Crown Prince doesn't have the time to make his life difficult right now. But you keep a stern eye on the Capital Army for me, you hear? Any signs of trouble, you come and tell me immediately, understand?"

You Miao quickly nodded, and Li Yan added, "If his place shorts you on anything you want to eat or use, just send a boy servant my way to get what you need."

You Miao answered with a "mn" and left Tingyu Pavilion. When he returned to the Prince's Residence, a eunuch soon followed with the Crown Prince's royal edict to grant You Miao some food and daily necessities. Zhao Chao accepted everything. Zhao Zhuo also granted You Miao a waist medal, so that he could use it to attend the morning assemblies when required.

You Miao took over the army registers that day and formally began his life as an official. There had been no news of Li Zhifeng, and it was making You Miao both agitated and worried. But he couldn't leave the capital to search for him, so he delivered word to Nie Dan's camp in West Liang to have them keep an eye out.

Three days later, the Emperor departed for the Southern Tour. Those with keen senses knew what was going on—it was to dodge the chaos of war—and this engulfed the entire capital in trepidation. You Deyou personally called on the prince's residence. He was still heavy-jowled and pot-bellied as always, but his tone of voice was much more respectful now.

"Well now, Lord You!" he greeted, his face plastered with smiles as soon as he stepped inside.

Zhao Chao was away at the morning assembly, and You Miao sat at the front in the main hall of the prince's residence, smiling without mirth and acting like he was the head of the household.

"Greetings, uncle. It's been many years."

You Deyou answered with a "heh-heh" and stood to the side. You Miao knew he shouldn't be slighted, however. Although You Deyou wasn't anything to look at, he had enough money to move the gods. Moreover, what You Deyou had accumulated over the years at the capital had built somewhat of a foundation for him within the political scene. Thus, You Miao beckoned him.

"Please have a seat, shu."

You Miao brewed a pot of tea to receive him, and You Deyou sighed after taking a sip. "People in the capital love to drink oolong, but it still can't match our green tea."

You Miao no longer played the part of a cheeky, clowning young master of three years ago, so he only chuckled in response. "What business does shu have? You can just tell me, and if there's anything I can do to help, go head and let me know."

As soon as You Deyou heard this, he piled on the smiles on his face. "I was just thinking of making a trip back to Jiangnan these days…"

You Miao blinked. As expected, You Deyou had also come to pay a visit because of the rumors spreading in the capital. Word was going around that the capital was being moved within days. Dispirited, the endowed clans were finding all sorts of ways to flee the city. You Deyou, attempting to

sound nonchalant, wanted to pack up and follow the merchant caravans to return to Jiangnan, then come back once war in the north stabilized.

You Deyou had always had dealings with the Ministry of Revenue, so it wouldn't be hard for him to get a travel permit. But moving his entire household down south couldn't be justified. After all, they were in extraordinary times and the government had strictly forbidden the capital's citizens to travel south without permission. Moreover, there were innumerable military checkpoints on the way, and without a travel permit issued by the Capital Army, it would be impossible to go from the Central Plains to West Liang and take the official roads to Sichuan.

You Deyou was determined to escape, and just when he was getting desperate, he suddenly remembered that he had a cheap nephew in the capital who just so happened to be the Tanhua. Yet back then, You Deyou was long in the know when You Dechuan had established another eldest principal son without telling You Miao, which made him no different from an accomplice in helping You Dechuan deceive You Miao. You Deyou had been around the block for decades, so he was well aware that this nephew of his was an expert at holding grudges. He had groaned incessantly when he heard You Miao had landed the Tanhua title; who knew the little ruffian would grow up to show so much promise? All that he'd restricted You Miao from, all that he yelled at him for, had all now become You Miao's capital.

Back then, You Deyou scorned You Miao for being too spendy—but that was how You Miao had managed to make the acquaintance of Li Yan and the gang of wastrels. At the time, both You Deyou and You Dechuan had time and again tried to urge the good-for-nothing brat to stop getting mixed up with the Third Prince Zhao Chao—but in the end, You Deyou had to come beg You Miao, who was teaming with the Third Prince.

You Miao knew better than You Deyou himself what devious little schemes he had in mind. You Miao had never once visited him since his return to the capital, pretending that he didn't have this uncle. After all, he was the one who had gotten swept out the door by You Dechuan. They both knew perfectly well where everything stood between them, so You Miao stopped acting in front of him altogether.

"Si-shu,[51] my dad kicked me out of the You Family's door, eh?" You Miao said lazily.

“Come now.” Immediately, You Deyou chuckled apologetically. “What are you saying? Your dad is an asshole. Besides, you’ve been part of the You Family since the day you were born. He’s not the one who dictates the blood in your veins.”

You Miao watched him with a smile without mirth, and it made You Deyou squirm uneasily. You Miao had wanted to make his life a little more difficult, but unfortunately, things right now were dire and that was a fact. There was no time to play games, so he said abruptly, “Si-shu, you’re here for the Capital Army’s travel permit?”

“Hehe, yes.” You Deyou added, “When I first heard that you’d come to the capital, I had something prepared for you. Alas, I was unexpectedly out with the caravans for a few months, so I didn’t have the time to come see you at the Imperial College.”

As he spoke, the butler that came with You Deyou stepped forward and respectfully presented a case. You Miao had to admit defeat; this uncle of his was paying up with both smiles *and* money, so he might as well help him this once. Cheerfully, You Miao rose from his seat. Quickly understanding, You Deyou followed You Miao into the study in the inner halls. You Miao picked up a brush and wrote up the travel permit, stamping it with his own official seal. Then of his own accord, he took out Zhao Chao’s seal of the Capital Army Commander and stamped it. Either way, Zhao Chao had permitted him to use his things as he willed. And then, the Third Prince’s personal seal was stamped as well.

You Deyou gawked, watching this blatant act of forgery.

“Guangwu!” You Miao called after he was done drawing up the papers.

When Cheng Guangwu showed up, You Miao passed the permit to him and instructed, “Take my uncle to the Ministry of War to find Ping Xi and have him stamp this with his passage seal. Shu, take someone with you for me for this trip. He’s from the same village as me, and was also appointed a Jinshi this year. His name is Zhang Wenhan. He’s still staying at the National University, waiting for his post assignment. I’m too busy these days to go see him. Bring word for me, too. Tell him to go back to the estate first and help me manage some household affairs, then come back to the capital after winter is over.”

You Miao was still a little worried, after all. He wanted to send Cheng Guangwu and the other boy servants back, too. You Deyou understood what he meant, and thanked him profusely as he left with the travel permit. You Miao returned to the main hall and sat down, feeling oddly pleased. He finally understood why so many scholars would fight their way onto the official path. Indeed, the feeling of possessing power and a seal, getting money and influence, was *pretty good*!

He stayed pleased for a while before he took out the case You Deyou had gifted him. When he glanced inside, he was stunned speechless.

A whole two thousand silver in bills!

All the money You Miao brought from the estate was only two thousand something, but he earned two thousand by simply stamping a document. You Miao was shocked. He stared at the money, dumbfounded, then noticed Changyuan was also watching from the side.

"Not a word of this, you hear?" he said.

Changyuan quickly nodded. "Master Uncle certainly is rich."

"Flesh and blood of the people; this is all blood and sweat from commerce," You Miao said. "Put this away for now. In a few days, tell Guangwu to make a trip home and have him bring this back to Jiangnan with him."

Over two thousand silver. It didn't make You Miao feel at ease. Since the old Emperor was going on a Southern Tour, he might as well send all the boy servants home. Li Zhifeng was almost here anyway.

Just as he made up his mind, the Zhao residence butler came and announced, "Lord You, someone from the Li residence is calling."

"Send him in," You Miao replied.

The newcomer this time was the second butler from the Chancellor's residence—the middle-aged man who often followed Li Yan. Although he had never interacted with You Miao, they were technically old acquaintances. You Miao was puzzled; if Li Yan had anything to say, he'd come find You Miao himself, so why send a butler? His question was soon answered, however. After the pleasantries were made, the butler brought up the subject of his visit: to request a travel permit. It wasn't for himself, but for his little concubine. He wanted her to go to Jiangnan and seek asylum with her mother and uncle. A blank travel permit stamped by the Ministry of War was already prepared; obtained by the butler himself, of course.

For Li Yan's sake, You Miao agreed and stamped his own seal, as well as Zhao Chao's commander seal, on the document. After the butler left, another one thousand silver in bills was delivered to the Zhao residence. Half of the reason You Miao agreed to the favor was because of Li Yan, but he couldn't help but marvel just how powerful the Lis were—even a butler could easily cough up some thousands of silver.

Zhao Chao returned early that evening, but he looked as if he was weighed down by much on his mind. At dinner, You Miao told him about what happened during the day; after all, Zhao Chao never agreed to the Li butler's business. You Miao wasn't sure what Zhao Chao would think, but unexpectedly, Zhao Chao only made a noise, acknowledging that he'd heard.

"My father will be leaving for the Southern Tour in a few days," Zhao Chao said. "There will be even more major houses of the capital coming to knock on our doors to beg for our seals, so just stamp as you see fit."

You Miao frowned. "Will it be all right letting them go?"

"If they came to me, I wouldn't have let them," Zhao Chao replied. "With the people gone, what morale would there be left to speak of? Maybe there won't be anyone left in the capital who'd be willing to fight. But they can't *not* be let go, either. If I don't release them on my end, they'll probably go raise hell with my brother. It's an impossible situation; there's no right decision. Otherwise, why'd you think he made you the middleman support to coordinate action?"

You Miao nodded slowly, understanding now. Even if the government didn't permit the large influential families to migrate south, they couldn't all be stopped either.

"Will there really be danger?" You Miao asked.

Zhao Chao shook his head. "No one can tell for sure. Even if the capital really is being moved to the south, we'd be the last wave of people to go anyway… Why don't you reconsider…?"

You Miao arched an eyebrow, and Zhao Chao quickly surrendered.

"Fine, fine, I won't rush you to go back, lest you slap me again. Figure it out yourself," he said, and they both became amused.

You Miao recalled all the money he had collected during the day, and said, "A few stamps and I've collected a few thousand silver. Let me split half of that with you."

Not knowing whether to laugh or cry, Zhao Chao replied, “You just keep it.”

You Miao then mentioned the subject of sending the boy servants home, to which Zhao Chao readily agreed. He would plant Cheng Guangwu, Changyuan, and Yaoguang randomly among the Southern Tour troops.

From the next day onward, sure enough, the major families of the capital came calling one after the other. They all showed up with blank travel documents already stamped by the Ministry of War, and requested You Miao’s and Zhao Chao’s respective seals. The handlers had all come ready with money. You Miao imagined that Ping Xi probably also received quite the offering, maybe even over ten thousand silver, so he unapologetically ripped off whoever came knocking. After two and a half days, he made just over ten thousand silver bills from signing around ten permits. These major families would all follow the Emperor anyway when the capital relocated; in the event the capital managed to hold down the fort, they would eventually return. You Miao might as well make some cash in the meantime.

Three days later, Zhao Mao departed for the South, and all of a sudden, a good half of the capital was empty. You Miao kept three thousand silver to use for the prince’s residence, then sent the three boy servants off. Cheng Guangwu stubbornly refused to leave at first, but in the end, You Miao still forced him to go—on threat of getting sacked. Cheng Guangwu had no choice but to ruefully depart for Jiangnan.

Once the servants were sent off, You Miao dived right in to arranging the defense matters of the Capital Army. Most of the court had left; the only ones who remained were the great scholars of the Directorate of Education, a number of youths, and some senior officials of the Ministry of War. Zhao Zhuo was designated Regent. Deep down, everyone knew what was going on, but no one dared voice it.

The wounded soldiers returning from the frontlines were increasing every day, and likewise, the situation at the warfront was intensifying. This continued until finally, news came from the frontlines: the Tartars had gained fifty thousand iron calvary in reinforcements, and they were riding straight for the Central Plains. Panic erupted instantly. It seemed that this

time, the Tartars didn't just plan on pillaging Hebei—they had their sights on all of the Central Plains!

"Call Nie Dan back to Hebei immediately!" Zhao Chao said in the morning assembly. "Have him take over Tang Hui's army!"

The officials exchanged looks of dismay. The assembly was smothered in an ominous air.

Zhao Zhuo forced himself to calm down, and said, "Tang Hui can hold steady still. Right now, we need to pull troops as soon as possible from Yang and Liu Prefectures, as well as their surrounding areas, to reinforce the Hebei warfront. How many men do we have left in the Capital Army?"

You Miao answered, "We just received eight hundred new recruits in the past few days…"

"Report—!"

From outside Wumen Gate, a scout spurred his horse at top speed and rushed right to the great hall. The officials' faces all dropped. The man was a messenger who had followed the Emperor on his Southern Tour. When the scout prostrated before the entrance of the hall, everyone's heart lurched.

Zhao Chao exchanged a look with Zhao Zhuo, his eyes filled with shock and his body trembling. When they gazed outside the doors, the scout spoke up.

"The road to West Liang has been cut off by the Five Barbarian Tribes! His Majesty encountered the Barbarian army while on route down south at Hanyin! Fortunately, General Nie protected the Emperor! His Majesty is now on route to return to court."

The officials all sighed in relief, but an even deeper shock sank in right after. The old Emperor was coming back, which meant the south road had been thoroughly cut off. In an instant, the entire capital was agitated and scared; it was every man for themselves now.

After the assembly adjourned, Zhao Chao followed Zhao Zhuo to the Imperial Study for a meeting without any more mind for questions. They summoned Li Yan and the others and questioned the messenger for details of the situation at Hanyin County. Almost everyone who joined the meeting this time were confidantes from both factions, but no one had the time to care anymore.

The messenger gave a broken account of what had happened: The Emperor had only just left the capital region, entering the border of Liang

Prefecture, when they encountered an attack from the Xianbei tribe at Hanyin County. The Southern Tour was escorted by only a thousand-some soldiers of the Imperial Army under the command of Lieutenant General Lin. They immediately requested Nie Dan's assistance.

Nie Dan never knew the old Emperor was conducting a Southern Tour, and Zhao Mao didn't have the guts to tell him. So by the time Nie Dan learned the Emperor was passing through his area of jurisdiction, heading south for the sole purpose of seeking immortality, he instantly blew his top. Brazenly, he remonstrated the old Emperor and forcibly sent him back to the capital.

Zhao Mao had covertly returned to the palace, but the rumors were worsening. As new recruits from Jiangnan continuously poured into the capital, they were incorporated into the Capital Army by You Miao's hands and subsequently sent to the frontlines. By the third of the twelfth month, Li Zhifeng still hadn't made it to the capital, and Hebei's defense army suffered their very first major defeat since the start of winter.

The defeat was caused by Tang Hui's misjudgment. It was the last month of the year, and nothing but snow fell for thousands of miles in this frigid winter. Anxious, Tang Hui had wanted to end the war quickly. In his haste, he carelessly fell for the Tartars' combined assault and ambush. Nearly twenty thousand new recruits drowned in Yellow River, and caught in a sorry plight, Tang Hui retreated to the south shore with his remaining troops. The entire line of defense in Hebei had fallen.

On top of the drowned new recruits, there were soldiers shot dead by the Tartars and soldiers who trampled each other. Altogether, the number of casualties had reached thirty thousand, and the number of wounded over ten thousand. The bodies were sent back to the capital against the backdrop of a frozen world, and the Capital Army camps overflowed with the anguished cries of the wounded.

It was Zhao Chao who dragged You Miao out of bed that morning. He said in a rush, "Tang Hui's army lost. You, go to the army camp! I'm going to the morning assembly! Now!" Then he hurried out of the prince's residence.

As You Miao stood outside the army camp, he witnessed with his own eyes the cruelty of war. Ever since he had taken on the post of Army Censor, the back-and-forth communication between the capital and the

frontline troops were nothing but long lists of the number of dead and wounded—mere numbers that You Miao had never registered until now, when the wounded were returning en masse and causing this startling sight. It wasn't until now that You Miao realized that those numbers were real people—lives no different from his own.

The camps were having a hard time taking in tens of thousands of wounded soldiers, and despite it being the middle of the coldest month of winter, many were placed outside exposed to the frozen air, crying and moaning.

You Miao went down the line of beds, checking on each of the wounded, and someone seized his hand, yelling in pain, "*Run*! We can't win! The Tartars are coming—!"

"Don't you upset the army morale around here!" roared a minor general.

"Lord You!" someone called out.

Several high-ranking officers were searching for You Miao, and they had finally found him.

At the sight of them, You Miao instructed, "Send someone to the Ministry of Revenue. Tell them the wounded who are laid up outside are to be transported to the city. Settle them in the side halls of the palace's west wing. Tell them I said so, quickly!"

Once You Miao had assigned work, he went to call roll on the field officers and distributed army registers, drawing twenty thousand reinforcements from the Capital Army to Tang Hui. He then assessed matters of military provisions and summarized them into a report for the Ministry of War.

"Lord You, the Ministry of Revenue said to dispatch the troops first…" one of the officers said. "They said the rations will follow soon after."

"Don't dispatch any troops without food!" You Miao was furious. "I'm going to go rush them. You all stay here."

You Miao hopped onto a horse and dashed straight for the Ministry of War through the flurrying snow. Since three days ago, the Ministry of War had been bustling like the markets with rowdy people everywhere. Quite a number of them were standing outside looking for financial reparation for the bereaved, begging the ministry's support staff for a response from the

higher-ups. You Miao pushed through the crowd, trying to find the registrar, but the man was surrounded by people, unable to break away.

"*Where's Ping Xi*?!" You Miao shouted.

"Vice Minister Ping is in the inner halls…" answered one of the officials who was busy looking for the registry. He yelled back, "There's no time right now… Why don't you…Lord You?"

"I'm here about the food supplies. I know the Ministry of Revenue's papers are stuck with you guys…"

You Miao called out to him as he dashed into the inner halls, and then almost ran right into Ping Xi. Having caught the man, You Miao hastily demanded, "Where are the papers for the food supplies?"

"There are no food supplies," Ping Xi replied gravely, his face solemn. "I received word from the Ministry of Revenue today. None of the grain has reached the capital yet."

You Miao was furious, and he waved the army registry in his hand. "*Twenty thousand men*! How can you ask people to fight on the frontlines without food?!"

Ping Xi stopped caring for everything else and started to fight with You Miao right there in the corridors. "The grain isn't here, what do you want me to do?!"

"I've got the imperial edict in my hands!" You Miao yelled.

Ping Xi yelled back, "Listen here! It's not that we're not allocating it, it's that we really can't—"

The two each took a step back and collected themselves.

You Miao said, "How about this—I'll go to the Ministry of Personnel and have them detain all the officials' salaried grain[52] for this year to supplement the military rations first."

Ping Xi replied ruefully, "Then you'll have to make a run to the palace first and get a personal decree from His Highness the Crown Prince. I personally don't mind, but the others…"

The army was outside the city, ready to be dispatched, but the rations hadn't made it yet. You Miao thought, *No matter how fast we rush, the earliest we can dispatch will be sundown.*

After a brief thought, Ping Xi added, "A frontline scout just arrived. Come with me to hear him. Then in a bit, after I've cleaned up here, I'll go

with you to the Ministry of Personnel…"

That works too, You Miao thought, and followed Ping Xi to the inner hall.

Although this band of wastrels usually fought each other both openly and covertly and didn't spend much time with soldiers, when it came to emergency situations, none of them were flippant about their responsibilities. This was also precisely why You Miao was willing to befriend Li Yan and the others—they might be deficient in petty matters, but they had a handle on what mattered.

Ping Xi asked as they traversed the hallways, "Have the people from your household been sent out of the capital? They didn't come back with His Majesty?"

"Yeah, only a few boy servants," You Miao replied. "After encountering the Barbarians in Hanyin County, Nie Dan escorted all those who wanted to go home."

"That's good…" Ping Xi nodded.

As they talked, a frontline messenger drenched in filth and blood barged down the hallway, shouting, "General Tang Hui has been sacrificed! *The frontline has fallen!*"

White noise filled You Miao's mind, and he felt the world spinning right then. Ping Xi's face fell, and he and You Miao stared at each other for a long time.

"Looks like there's no more need to dispatch troops," Ping Xi said.

You Miao was in disbelief. "Tang Hui's dead?! Tang-da-ge's dead? *Just like that?!!*"

Brokenly, the messenger gave a rough account of what had transpired. Heavy snow had fallen the night before at the river, and its surface was frozen. The Tartars thus wrapped their horseshoes with cloth and snuck quietly across, ambushing the main army camp of Tianqi. Tang Hui wasn't prepared for enemy attack, but instead of retreating, he charged the army to fight back. The two sides clashed and fought at the south shore for an entire night. In the morning, the river ice cracked. Innumerable soldiers fell to their frozen deaths. Tang Hui was shot by an arrow and died in the waters.

You Miao shivered, feeling nothing but wild chills running down his spine. The Tartars had crossed Yellow River. The distance between the

south shore and the capital was only four hundred miles, which also meant…

Ping Xi didn't care to talk anymore and rushed out of the Ministry of War in a panic with You Miao hot on his heels.

As they exited the ministry, You Miao took out his official seal and passed it to the captain who had followed him to there, and instructed, "Take this and pass on the command. Without my orders, no one is allowed to leave the capital. Tell Zheng Yong to reinforce the defenses at all four gates of the capital, immediately! And every single Capital Army troop is to return to defense!"

The captain was a little behind, and he asked, confused, "Lord You, are we not reinforcing the frontlines anymore?"

You Miao waved him off and ordered him to pass on the command at once. Ping Xi had already hopped onto his horse. Neither of them spoke on the way to the palace, but their minds were overrun with calamitous noise. There were guards everywhere when they arrived at the palace grounds, and as soon as they stepped foot in the Imperial Garden, a personal attendant belonging to Zhao Zhuo scolded them.

"His Highness is in the middle of a meeting in the study… Lord You?"

"This is urgent!" You Miao exclaimed. "There's no time to announce us!"

A guard yelled, "No! No one is allowed to enter!"

From inside the study came the faint sound of Zhao Zhuo and Zhao Chao having a furious argument, and You Miao's heart stopped. Zhao Zhuo had always been pleasant in front of the officials; he had never heard him curse so violently before. It sounded serious?

Ping Xi didn't dare to barge in, so he said, "Let's wait outside, I guess."

"Nope!"

You Miao went forward and pushed the doors in. The guards didn't dare to stop him and backed down to their posts. Without another word, You Miao barged into the Imperial Study. The situation inside made him jump, however.

"You're defying the Emperor—"

The voices came to a halt.

From the outside, it sounded as if it was only Zhao Chao and Zhao Zhuo present. But to You Miao's surprise, the entire hall was packed. The military officers in Zhao Chao's camp stood on one side while the civil officials on Zhao Zhuo's side stood on the other. Zhao Zhuo's expression was terrifyingly stormy whereas Zhao Chao's was red from all the shouting.

In that moment, the room was scarily quiet. Everyone was staring at You Miao.

"Tang Hui is dead," You Miao stated in a low voice. "The Tartar army has already crossed Yellow River."

Zhao Zhuo's voice trembled, "Very good… Now no one can leave."

Zhao Chao took a deep breath, then said with a voice that was forcibly suppressed, "You Miao, come with me."

On the twentieth of the twelfth month, the defeated army at Yellow River was withdrawn to the capital, and for a time, the city was filled with the wounded. Gazing outward from the South Gate of the capital, one could see army camps standing in great numbers like a forest; banners and flags flapped in the frigid winds and cries choked the air. Zhao Zhuo gave strict orders to lock down information, the army built rigorous defenses around the city, and fourteen separate squadrons were sent down to Jiangnan to issue the Order of Due Diligence.[53]

That night, the lamps in the palace remained bright as military reports flowed out like water. The Capital Army was sent to dig trenches outside the city walls and make pits to trap horses, meanwhile the city's interior was overrun with soldiers erecting defense installations. The giant firepits atop the city towers were lit, and barrels upon barrels of boiling oil were transported to the towers and set down in rows along the battlement. You Miao personally led the soldiers to guard the city gates where large bands of civilians had gathered, wanting to leave.

"You *cannot* leave!" You Miao yelled angrily from the wall, bearing with the frigid winds. "No one is allowed to leave the city! Archers! At the ready!"

The archers lining the city walls pointed their arrows at the people down below. The crowd immediately erupted into noise.

"If you're so capable, go kill enemies on the battlefield! How dare you point weapons at your own citizens!" someone roared.

You Miao's heart was pounding painfully in his chest. He knew the Tartars had already entered the Central Plains, so fleeing the city now was no different from running to one's death. The only way to ensure survival was to remain in the city—but he couldn't tell them that.

And there was one other important point—Nie Dan was currently on his way back to the capital with his army. Although there weren't many men under his command, they were brave soldiers who had spent years fighting the Barbarians; each of them was worth one hundred men. The Due Diligence Armies from every region were also hurrying their way over. As long as the capital could hold steady until their arrival, the Tartar army would suffer battle on both fronts; from both the capital's forces and the Due Diligence Army. They would surely be driven back beyond the Wall in disgrace.

Moreover, this city was the country's *capital*; the previous dynasty had made an immense number of arrangements when they built it here. As long as the defense generals didn't make any stupid moves, it would be almost impossible to drive them to abandon the city. Yet the people of the capital would have none of it, and their cries of malcontent only grew louder in volume as time went on.

"Kill him! Kill that treacherous official!"

"The nation is in peril! Treacherous official; you bring ruin to our Tianqi!"

You Miao was incensed at once, and in that instant, something occurred to him—a spy! There must be a spy inciting discord and instigating a mutiny! He carefully scanned the scene and noticed that there was indeed someone leading the abuse. When the man shouted, the others around him would respond in kind and echo the same sentiment, causing the momentum to ripple through the crowd. You Miao arched his bow, nocked his arrow, and shot. Screams ripped from the gathering people.

"Do not listen to the lies of Barbarian spies!" You Miao yelled angrily. "Whoever wants to open the city gates will have to cross over my dead body first!"

The crowd fell silent.

"Well done." Zhao Chao's low voice came.

He had only just returned from outside the city and ran right into You Miao, who was up on the city tower.

“Why didn’t you stay inside the palace?” Zhao Chao asked, his eyes bloodshot.

You Miao was also exhausted from exertion, and replied, “There’s nothing for me to do in the palace. Even the officials want to run. Li Yan was afraid he wouldn’t be able to suppress them, so I’m here. What were you guys arguing about today?”

“He wants to assemble a small escort from the Capital to send my father out,” Zhao Chao said plainly.

You Miao was speechless.

“If my father is gone, the morale of the entire capital will collapse. He *cannot* leave,” Zhao Chao said.

You Miao answered with a “mn.” The situation was evolving too fast—they were now facing a crushing defeat in the span of one night. Tang Hui’s death had sunk the entire capital into a state of terror. Even though news hadn’t arrived from the frontlines yet, the civilians all knew they were about to lose. And what was even more troublesome was the Tartar spies who had infiltrated the capital, causing people to stir.

Zhao Chao started, “Make a trip to the palace—”

But just as they were talking, the ground started shaking in the far distant horizon that was bloodied by the setting sun. In that moment, everyone in the towers and battlements fell absolutely silent. You Miao and Zhao Chao stopped their conversation when they noticed the dark mass of the Tartar army overtaking the plains as they pushed toward the city gates.

“Do I still go?” You Miao’s voice was quivering.

“No,” Zhao Chao said. “Let them come.”

As the Tartar army advanced toward the capital, the stomping hooves alerted the people to what was about to happen and they scattered in a heartbeat. A rider with a vellum scroll in hand was dispatched from the Tartar army, and he galloped ahead of the main forces.

When he approached the city gate, he yelled in the Han tongue, “Heed this order, King of Tianqi—!”

Zhao Chao’s face darkened horribly in an instant. No one from the city wall answered.

The messenger paced back and forth for a moment, then yelled again, “By imperial order of the Great Tartar Emperor—you are to promptly open

the city gates and surrender in order to avoid the ill fate of extermination! Should you remain stubborn, once the city falls, *none shall be spared*!"

"A Han?" You Miao wondered.

Zhao Chao sneered. "It's Lieutenant General Lin Jiu from the Zhongji Camp. He probably surrendered. What big words he's spouting."

"Don't underestimate the enemy," You Miao said quietly. "What do we do now?"

You Miao had come across this subject before when he studied the art of war and domestic policies under Sun Yu, and Li Zhifeng had also mentioned the same about the tribes beyond the border—the Tartars were the most brutal in nature, and the thirstiest for blood. They would slaughter every village they occupied and massacre every city they sieged. In the frontier war over a century ago, none of the cities besieged by the Tartars were spared.

"Tell your king to come out!" the messenger shouted again. "If you remain silent, do not blame the Tartar Emperor for being unjust!"

Li Yan hurried up the stairs to the battlements while the messenger yelled his threats, and he shook his head. When You Miao frowned in response, Li Yan said, "Defend it to the death."

Zhao Chao shouted his order, "Bring me my bow and arrow!"

As soon as Zhao Chao spoke, You Miao knew this meant trouble. He immediately rushed down the tower steps, roaring, "Inform the entire city! All civilians are to hide!"

You Miao's order had just been issued when Zhao Chao pulled his bow and nocked the arrow. The arrow was released, whistling out like a shooting star. In a heartbeat, the messenger dropped from his horse! There was an instant uproar from the Tartar army, followed by the belting of arrogant laughter—yet no one charged forward on their horses.

After the messenger was shot dead, Zhao Chao roared furiously from the wall, challenging the awaiting foe. "Siege if you dare!"

Convulsing with anger, Zhao Chao twisted his head back. "Fuckin'… Wait till they're closer, then let loose the arrows… Ziqian? You Miao? Where is he?"

Like the tide, the Tartar army pulled back; the battalion in the back became the front as it charged forward, but the army remained at a distance from the city. After breaking up and spreading out, the formation consisting

of nearly twenty thousand men reorganized into a rectangular one composed of two rows, front and back. Moving in an orderly fashion, the front row soldiers lay down and raised their feet to the sky. Then with a jerk and a kick, they hooked the crossbows and caught them between their feet. Swiftly after, the soldiers in the back row approached to nock the arrows.

Zhao Chao whirled around and yelled, “Take cover!”

At the same time, there was the faint sound of the commanding officers of the Tartar army giving curt orders. Absolute silence descended on the capital in a ten-mile radius. Amidst the flaming red of the setting sun, it was as if time had stopped.

A few breaths later, tens of thousands of bow strings simultaneously strummed—and arrows in equal numbers shot out toward the clouds!

[Chapter 30]

You Miao furiously rode through the streets on his horse. His order to have the civilians scatter and evacuate spread from one person to the next—one to ten, ten to hundreds. Everything was happening too fast; the Tartar iron arrows had shot high into the sky, drawing out a singular long streak, and blanketed the entire capital. The arrows had plunged downward from the heavens to the earth like torrential rain, piercing through each tile and shingle, cutting through every tree.

The sound of showering arrows was everywhere. The people screamed in panic but there was nowhere to run, and those who couldn't get away fast enough were nailed to the ground. All at the same time, one such arrow hit the rump of You Miao's steed, and in a whirling spin, You Miao was sent flying. He reflexively hugged his head as he crashed into the wall of a house, just as another arrow shot through the house's roof. The shingles were shattered and debris came tumbling down. A man dashed over, pulled You Miao close with his powerful arms, then tumbled and dodged into the house. The man then quickly raised an earthen vat to cover them both. The fall had You Miao seeing stars.

"Are you trying to get yourself killed?!" Li Yan roared into You Miao's ears.

Meanwhile, the arrow rain changed course to target the palace. The shots shattered the window lattices of the golden halls. The officials who were in a meeting screamed in panic, and multiple guards rushed over to shield Zhao Zhuo, bringing him to hide behind a pillar. The glass shingles of Jinluan Hall, the throne room, crashed down and raised dust everywhere.

When the sound of the assault was over at last, cries and screams washed over the capital in undulating waves. Dizzy, You Miao pushed the water vat away and sneezed.

After collecting himself, he said, "I remember…my teacher once told me that the Tartars generally attack a city with arrows…"

Li Yan was covered in dust from head to toe, cutting a sorry figure. Tugging You Miao up, he said, "Be more careful. Worry about your own little life first before you lead any troops."

You Miao said as he panted, "It's fine… There's gonna be some time before the next wave of arrows."

Just then, there came the sound of beating drums and shouting outside the city. The Tartars had begun their siege.

Amidst the terrible cries, the plains beyond the capital had all of a sudden transformed into a battlefield. Li Yan looked everywhere for a horse to go to the palace, but all the horses had already been shot dead. You Miao rushed back to the city gate at which he was previously stationed, but just when he was about to climb up, he was blocked by Zhao Chao and subsequently dragged back down the stairs.

It was mayhem all around them as soldiers rushed up the city wall hauling braziers and hot oil.

"Get yourself to the palace!" Zhao Chao yelled in You Miao's ear.

"No!" You Miao ignored him and yelled back, "We need to get *everyone* to the inner city![54]"

"The outer city can hold! We can't evacuate the people right now!" Zhao Chao rebuked.

"Listen to me!" You Miao exclaimed as arrows began raining down once more.

As soon as the Tartars began their siege of the capital, what Li Zhifeng had told him about the Tartars' habitual battle strategy abruptly returned to him. The Quanrong and the Tartars had regularly clashed beyond the border, so the Quanrong knew their tactics like the back of their hands. The Tartars were like ravenous wolves when they sieged enemy cities—first, they would assault the city with a barrage of arrows to intimidate the enemy. However, iron arrows were costly and therefore limited in stock, so it was not feasible to prolong this stage of attack. Once the arrow rain ended, they would drive the surrendered soldiers to turn against their own city while the real Tartar force remained behind, conserving their strength. When the enemy was exhausted, the Tartar main force would finally launch their attack.

Knowledge of this made it imperative that the civilians be evacuated to the palace. Since the ones assaulting the city were surrendered Han soldiers, when they died at the hands of the Capital Army, the Tartars would catapult their heads over the city walls—which would surely shake up the Capital Army. It would crush their morale.

Zhao Chao huffed heavily and frowned as he listened to You Miao explain everything. He asked, “Who told you all this?”

“Li Zhifeng!” You Miao replied. “Stop asking questions now! Quick! Evacuate the people to the inner city! A second wave of arrows is coming tomorrow morning, as soon as the attacking army is dead!”

Zhao Chao took off his seal and passed it to You Miao without anther word, and You Miao rode to the palace. The palace was in a state of chaos; everywhere, there were iron arrows impaled in the ground.

With a terribly dark expression, Zhao Zhuo asked, “What if spies infiltrate the palace?”

You Miao answered, “Station someone with the guards to keep watch. Otherwise, we won’t be able to hold when the second wave of arrows comes.”

“Impossible!” one of the civil officials exclaimed in alarm. “The inner city is a highly critical place! How can it be so easily opened to the public? His Majesty is still recuperating in the inner palace; if spies infiltrate…”

Zhao Zhuo agreed, “No… No, it’s too risky. Dear Minister You, it’s not that I don’t trust your judgment, but—”

You Miao cried, outraged, “The people come first! Society second! The ruler is of the least importance![55] *Your Highness*!”

His rebuke snapped Zhao Zhuo out of it. The pair of ruler and subject stared at each other for a long time. It was dead silent within the hall, with no one daring to speak a word.

“You’re right, we’ll do it your way,” Zhao Zhuo said at last. “How did you come by such knowledge about the Tartars?”

You Miao bowed. “This subject has a Quanrong at home. He was the one who told me.”

The court officials started to raise voices of concern, and Zhao Zhuo asked, “Where is that Quanrong now?”

“He’s currently on the road to seek me in the capital,” You Miao replied.

Zhao Zhuo heaved a sigh, then wrote an imperial edict on behalf of the Emperor and charged You Miao to deliver it to the Imperial Army in order to open the palace gates.

On the twenty-first of the twelfth month, the civilians of the capital gathered en masse. The palace gates opened, allowing civilians to enter the inner city. The city walls of the outer city thronged with surrendered Tianqi soldiers, and under the threat of arrows and lashes, they began their assault of the capital. Above the walls, torches lined the battlements, and scoop after scoop of hot oil splashed down. When You Miao ran up the tower stairs, Zhao Chao was directing the Capital Army, defending the city.

"We can't keep this up, material resources will be used up too fast."

You Miao's brows were deeply furrowed, watching as the corpses below piled up like mountains. Many of the surrendered soldiers had already been shot to tattered flesh, and some had even been thoroughly cooked by the hot oil. The offensive stench of burnt bodies and blood drifted into the city.

"Not a single Tartar is dead. Every single one we're killing right now is a surrendered soldier of Tianqi, goddammit! These Barbarian dogs are fucking ruthless!" Zhao Chao angrily swore. "We've got to think of something! Or else we'll be out of oil and boulders when the actual Tartars enter the battlefield!"

You Miao sighed and then looked outside of the city. There were at least forty or fifty thousand soldiers spearheading the siege. The Tartars were basically piling Han corpses up the city walls, but with the Tartar army and their archers behind them watching like hawks, any Han soldier who dared to run would be shot to death regardless.

"Your own peers' hot oil and fiery boulders at the front, and the Tartars' sharp swords at your back," You Miao mumbled.

The only way out for these surrendered soldiers was to successfully siege the capital. Should they retreat, death awaited them. You Miao and Zhao Chao exchanged a look. There was only one way to break out of this predicament—have the Emperor ascend the tower and suppress the surrendered soldiers with his imperial authority. Perhaps that would awaken the hot blood in the soldiers and help them make a comeback.

"I will go to talk to Father and persuade him to preside over the warfront," Zhao Chao said. "Only with him here will the surrendered soldiers stop their assault."

"He might not come. It's too dangerous," You Miao said. He didn't have much hope for Zhao Mao's courage—otherwise, the Emperor

wouldn't have used the Southern Tour as the reason to flee.

"Times are different now," Zhao Chao reasoned. "Go rest at the foot of the watchtower, I'll head to the palace."

Day was about to break, and the warfront outside ceased fire for the moment. While the siege was still ongoing, the yelling had gradually weakened. Zhao Chao got the lieutenant general to supervise the operations. Utterly exhausted, You Miao found a random place and dropped to the ground, shutting his eyes without bothering to remove his armor. The sound of killing still rang in his ears, but it slowly faded away as he drifted off to sleep. In his dream, Li Zhifeng had come back and was rampaging with troops he had gotten from somewhere, and was cutting down all the Tartars.

He didn't know how long he'd slept, but it was a loud shout that jolted him awake.

"Lord You!" someone yelled next to his ears. "Hurry and take cover!"

The soldiers in the city were running about in confusion. A minor general hauled You Miao up by the shoulder and pushed him to the foot of the city wall with several soldiers shielding him. There was rumbling all around.

Not knowing what was happening, You Miao shouted, "What's going on?"

Rocks started flying in; the next wave of the Tartars' attack had begun. This time, tens of thousands of heads were mixed with the catapulted boulders—they were the heads of Tianqi's soldiers, the ones that had been led by Tang Hui, and later captured after the battle at Yellow River.

"Where's Zhao Chao?" You Miao demanded.

The minor general answered, "His Highness is supervising the operations at the west gate! They're under attack there, too!"

The flying rocks crashed through roofs, raising dust and debris. The Tartars started to burn wolf feces outside the north gate, making the air so suffocating that one could barely open their eyes. There was no discerning direction inside the black smoke, and You Miao ran around for a bit before he found a horse to dash toward the west gate in search of Zhao Chao.

As he expected, the Emperor didn't come to the frontlines. On the night of the twenty-third of the twelfth month, Zhao Mao abdicated and passed on the throne to Zhao Zhuo. This news was announced to the entire

city. Just as day was beginning to break amidst the black smoke carried in by the northerly winds, the Tartars launched a second wave of arrows.

This time, it was a torrent of nearly a hundred thousand iron arrows—arrows collected from the dead Tianqi soldiers at the battle of Yellow River. The arrows blacked out the entire sky, blanketing the whole capital.

On the twenty-fourth of the twelfth month, the surrendered soldiers had finally all died. The Tartars dispatched a messenger to accost the capital.

"Lord You!" called a Capital Army officer from within the inner city.

Someone bumped You Miao, who was fast asleep. You Miao was completely covered in grime and dust, his face filthy. He had hustled the entire night the evening before, checking on the wounded and the dead and reconfiguring the Capital Army troops. Exhausted to the extreme, he rubbed his eyes when he was roused.

"What's happened? I'm over here!"

It took a while for the officer to recognize You Miao, and he quickly said, "His Majesty has summoned Lord You to the palace for a meeting!"

At first, You Miao was amazed that the Emperor had finally emerged—but then he remembered that Zhao Mao had abdicated, and the current emperor was the previous Crown Prince, Zhao Zhuo. He quickly climbed to his feet and hopped on a horse, heading to the palace.

When You Miao arrived at Taihe Hall, it was quiet inside. He fixed his armor before entering through the side door with no one stopping him. The crowd inside the hall was divided into the civil officials, with Li Yan at the head, and the military officers, with Zhao Chao as their lead. Li Yan turned his head and shot You Miao a look, signaling him to not speak. You Miao understood and joined the civil officials' row.

After a long silence, present emperor Zhao Zhuo snorted. "Your Tartar Khan certainly has a big appetite."

The messenger spoke a slew of gibberish, and cold sweat rolled down the forehead of the Han standing to the side. He was an interpreter who had been brought in.

The interpreter stammered nervously, "To report… To report to Your Majesty, the Tartar Khan said… If Your Majesty is unwilling…unwilling to negotiate peace, then harm will unfortunately come to the civilians in the city… What the Khan wants is…"

The messenger gave the Han interpreter a look, then started to talk again. He was smirking as he spoke, gesticulating in an extremely arrogant manner. Everyone inside the hall was able to understand the several terms being articulated. When the messenger was done, he urged the Han interpreter to explain.

"Tell me," Zhao Zhuo said. "What are the terms?"

The Han interpreter's voice quivered. "First, su…submit to their Khan and honor him as Emperor. The Tianqi King is ordered to march with his army, who will travel to pay homage to the Khan. The fifth prince is to be sent to the northern frontier as hostage."

An uproar erupted among the officials. The interpreter, once he had begun, stopped trying to conceal anything and continued to speak.

"Second, provide…a thousand bolts…of silk, thirty thousand…thirty thousand gold, a…a hundred silver, three thousand…beauties, and the dragon jade disc[56]...in order to foster a cordial relationship between the two nations.

"Third, pay a tribute of five thousand…gold and five thousand…silver, annually.

"Fourth, Tianqi nationals are forbidden to go beyond the north shore of Yellow River…

"Fifth, release Quanrong's young prince…Sanado."

The officials started talking among themselves in hushed voices. You Miao's temper flared immediately, and his hand upon his sword shook uncontrollably. This was intolerably humiliating!

"You…" Zhao Zhuo laughed in spite of himself. "Did you think that…"

The messenger didn't wait for him to finish before babbling more gibberish. The interpreter looked at the messenger, then at Zhao Zhuo.

Sensing something amiss, Zhao Zhuo frowned. "What did he say?"

The interpreter answered, "He said… The Khan knows Your Majesty is waiting for Nie Dan and the Due Diligence Army. But the Tartars, the Xianbei, the Jie, and other Barbarian Tribes have formed an alliance. Your esteemed General Nie was already killed by King Changyao at Mount Lin…"

In that instant, the imperial court was thrown into panic.

“Misleading lies!” Zhao Chao shouted.

The power of his voice briefly stunned the messenger, but he soon recovered and sneered.

The interpreter glanced at Zhao Chao, and then turned to Zhao Zhuo. “The Jiangnan forces are also trapped by the snowstorm at Zheng Liang Pass. The Due Diligence Army won’t make it here within three months. The capital is isolated and without support. Pray Your Majesty consider carefully.”

The messenger then tossed out two items. They clacked as they hit the ground, their echoes reverberating ceaselessly within the palace walls.

They were Nie Dan’s vambraces and his waist medal.

Never before had Zhao Chao ever been so thoroughly shaken. Likewise, You Miao couldn’t speak for a long time. The officials were all shocked. Even Nie Dan was dead?! How could that be?!

Zhao Zhuo abruptly stood, but Li Yan immediately shot him a look, signaling him that he must not act impulsively at this moment. He then turned to the messenger and said, “Will the messenger please stand down and take a rest?”

An officer thus led the envoy away. Solemn silence mantled the hall. Not a single soul dared to be the first to speak. You Miao scanned around the room and abruptly realized that, before he’d realized it, it was filled with people he was familiar with.

Zhao Zhuo deliberated for a long time before he said, “Minister Qin, you will be responsible for keeping an eye on that man. See if you can coax more information from him.”

Qin Shaonan heeded the order and left. Zhao Zhuo sat back down upon the throne and sighed heavily, the sound echoing in the hall.

“What do my dear ministers think?” Zhao Zhuo asked, his voice grave.

After an enduring silence, Li Yan answered, “Annual tribute. Annual tribute has existed since ancient times.”

Zhao Chao said coldly, “So what Lord Li means is that such demands, such terms, still allow room for negotiation?”

“Your Highness,” Ping Xi spoke up, “General Nie’s army will not be able to perform their due diligence anymore.”

His words had reminded everyone of that fact. In that moment, all eyes were fixed on Nie Dan’s vambraces and his waist medal. Nie Dan, who had

clinked glasses with You Miao, who had personally cooked for him, had died—just like that—in the blink of half a year.

Tang Hui, the one who had visited the estate back then, the one who laughed with You Miao and called each other brothers, had also died. Just like that.

A little dazed, You Miao stared blankly at the things Nie Dan had left behind.

Debate heated up among the court officials again as they argued over whether they should fight or make peace.

Red in the face from the fighting, Zhao Chao bellowed furiously, his cries rocking the heavens, "No one is allowed to leave! Otherwise, how can we possibly face the Zhao ancestors in the heavens?!"

By the time You Miao snapped out of it, Zhao Chao's sword was already unsheathed and Zhao Chao himself was ready to rush at Li Yan. You Miao hastily held him back. Li Yan furiously shoved Zhao Chao away, then fixed his robes that had been yanked into disarray. He didn't bother saying more to him, turning to Zhao Zhuo instead.

"Regarding the fourth term," Li Yan said, his expression as cold as the coldest ice, and his voice equally as frosty, "the Tartars are a nomadic tribe. It's impossible for them to take root in the Central Plains. Even if the territory north of Yellow River will belong to them, how would the savages know how to run it? If we can send our officials over to help them manage the land, then at the end of the day, it would still be Tianqi's land—"

"Breaking up our land?! Li Yan, you beast!" Zhao Chao bellowed angrily as he pulled out his sword again.

"Take him away!" Zhao Zhuo stood up angrily, and the guards on both sides of the hall rushed over. You Miao stopped them, however.

"You Majesty! We can talk this through!"

"In regards to the fifth term," Li Yan continued, disregarding Zhao Chao's outburst, "who is the Third Prince of Quanrong? This subject is none the wiser. Perhaps he's long dead. We won't be able to release the man no matter what. With Your Majesty's permission, this subject is willing to enter the Tartar camp to negotiate peace. This subject's family has wholeheartedly served the empire for three generations, and now that the nation is in peril, I only hope to use this life to exchange for a breath of relief for You Majesty."

You Miao dragged Zhao Chao to the wall and pushed him against it, holding him down. Li Yan wasn't scared of him in the least, and he didn't even falter as he said, "If Your Highness wants this subject's life, then wait until this subject returns from negotiations. I will for sure offer my head up then."

The setting sun filtered into the room, its rays shooting through the window lattice of Taihe Hall. Li Yan was standing at the center, alone; his tall, slender form reflected an unspeakable forlornness.

Zhao Chao angrily exited the hall. He chucked his sword to the ground and left the palace without looking back.

* * *

On the morning of the twenty-fourth of the twelfth month, small flurries were flying in the air in the capital. Li Yan rode out of the city by himself to negotiate peace with the Tartar army. Zhao Chao watched him from atop the battlements, seemingly stirred.

This was the most despairing of all winters. Reinforcements from Jiangnan had been slow to arrive, and the city was running short on food. Upon his ascension to the throne, Zhao Zhuo changed the era name to Nanzhao. There was still no news from Nie Dan's army, so their only hope now was the troops from Jiangnan.

You Miao saw Li Yan out of the city, and in that moment, the impression he gave off seemed to have changed. You Miao couldn't help but steal a glimpse at Zhao Chao, unable to describe the feeling in his heart.

Since the Tartar envoy had left, Zhao Chao hadn't stepped foot into the palace again. Seeing You Miao coming up the stairs, he asked, "So what did they agree on?"

You Miao replied, "They want to negotiate peace, and agreed to the second and third terms. Li Yan is off to the peace talk with the treaty papers."

Zhao Chao snorted. "That royal brother of mine refused to submit to the Khan and send royal blood as hostage, huh?"

You Miao sighed. He also knew that it was impossible to have the Emperor bend down as a subject of the Khan. Even if the Emperor was willing to kneel, the soldiers and the people would never allow it. With so many dead in battle, the military would probably mutiny the moment the Emperor prostrated himself.

“What about the matter with ceding territory?” Zhao Chao asked. “So many have died, and now we’re giving them Hebei?”

“I told them that Hebei must absolutely not be ceded,” You Miao replied. “The Tartars only want money. Even if we give them land, they won’t know how to farm it, so why not just pay them taxes? Otherwise, if the Central Plains loses the natural barrier, we can forget about survival. But Zhao Chao, tell me—if we must cede, what should we do?”

The Tartar army parted to make way as Li Yan rode, disappearing into the enemy camp.

“If it were you, what would you do?” Zhao Chao asked.

You Miao couldn’t think of a plan, either. With the situation as it was, if they didn’t negotiate peace…

“If it were me,” You Miao said, “I’d say, close the city gates. Let’s all charge out gloriously to battle. If we die, we die. Thousands of years ago, there wasn’t a Tianqi in the world—nothing of it will remain, either, centuries down the road.”

The light flurry of snow blocked their view, and gently did it blanket the entirety of the capital. The city was still deep in exhausted slumber in between the cracks of war.

Zhao Chao murmured, “But we’ve already missed the best timing to do so.”

And that certainly was the case. Two days ago, the Tartars were driving the prisoners of war to attack the city. Just now, You Miao came to the sudden realization that if the Emperor and the Crown Prince had been willing to charge out to the battlefield wielding their imperial authority with Zhao Chao as their right arm, they could’ve surely made the prisoners of war turn around and fight back. Maybe that battle could’ve decided their victory or defeat—that was what Zhao Chao had in mind when he went to the palace back then.

But Zhao Zhuo had been slow to respond precisely because all of his hopes were riding on Nie Dan; he was waiting for the Due Diligence Army to come to aid. Now all those hopes were dashed, and Li Yan had gone to the peace negotiation shouldering the heavy burden of the entire imperial court.

That day, the entire capital, high and low, was caged in gloom. There weren’t many left at court; Zhao Zhuo still hadn’t spoken, but disquiet was

apparent in his eyes.

"Thirty thousand taels of gold, a hundred thousand taels of silver," the Vice Ministry of Revenue said. "To report Your Majesty, the national treasury is still in deficit from the previous year. Presently, there is only eight thousand gold left, and although we do have two hundred and twenty silver, there is still the indemnity of a thousand bolts of silk on top of that. The tax collected from the Jiangnan region still has not yet entered the treasury. There is not enough, Your Majesty!"

Zhao Zhuo tiredly rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Borrow the missing amount from court officials. Once the taxes come in next year, we'll pay them back one by one."

The royal family opened their coffers, counting what money they had left while waiting for Li Yan's return. It had been almost a whole day, and there still wasn't any news from the Tartar army. Zhao Chao had tried sending scouts out to hunt for information, but they all returned empty-handed; the Tartars had locked down almost every road leading out of the capital. You Miao scrutinized the map, a bad feeling haunting him.

Late in the night, a court eunuch showed up to ask You Miao for money. You Miao protested, "What money? I've only got two thousand silver left. Take it all if you must."

All of You Miao's money bills had been handed to the boy servants to bring back to Jiangnan, and all he had left were the one thousand taels of silver exchanged before the war broke out. Zhao Chao counted out five hundred taels for the eunuch to take back to the palace, foregoing the loan note altogether.

"Li Yan might be detained," Zhao Chao said worriedly.

You Miao looked at the map with knitted brows. "Are there secret passages going out of the capital?"

"There's one, but it's a waterway." Zhao Chao pointed at a canal behind the palace. "It leads to a cliff by Yellow River. It was previously used for flood discharge. It's very narrow, almost impassable. Only one person can squeeze through at a time. Are you thinking of going out to seek reinforcements?"

You Miao shook his head, not quite sure what he wanted either. He kept thinking that maybe Li Zhifeng would be just outside the city, waiting

to come rescue him. Yet with an army fifty thousand strong, there was no way he could face such a powerful foe alone, even if he were brave enough.

It was just that, for some reason, You Miao simply wanted to see his face right now, right this second. Whether he lived or died tomorrow, it would still be good if they could see each other again.

On the twenty-fifth of the twelfth month, only a touch of the waning moon was visible in the night sky. From the far distance drifted the faint sound of a flute, and at the music, You Miao put away the map he was studying and looked up, glancing outside the window. He slowly walked outside and stopped in the yard. The frigid wind blew; it was the coldest time of the year.

"Go to bed." Zhao Chao rested a hand on You Miao's shoulder. "Who knows—maybe everything will be resolved while you sleep, and the Tartars will be gone."

You Miao smiled wryly. "Ain't that the dream. I remember when I was little, I once went back to Yang Prefecture with my mom. It flooded that year, and my mom told me to go to sleep—she said by the time I woke up, the waters would have retreated and all would be well."

Zhao Chao made a nasal noise in response and said, "Don't be too worried."

Just then, a man came to the prince's residence and hastily reported, "Your Highness! His Majesty summons you to the palace."

Zhao Chao visibly drooped. "What does he want now?"

The man who had come was a simple guard; Zhao Chao knew that nothing would come of questioning him, so he signaled You Miao with his eyes that he was heading out.

For some reason, You Miao had a bad feeling. He quickly stopped him. "Hang on."

He went back to his room and rummaged around for a bit. When he dug out the dagger Li Yan had given him once upon a time, he handed it to Zhao Chao.

"Keep this on you for self-protection."

"Keep it for yourself," Zhao Chao said.

"Stop wasting your breath! You keep it!" You Miao urged.

Zhao Chao stared at You Miao hard for a moment before taking the dagger and stuffing it into his boot. He then left for the palace.

The faint music outside had stopped. You Miao returned to his room to lie down, but he tossed and turned the entire night. So much had happened in a mere half a year. He had to lull himself to sleep, telling himself that when he woke again, the Tartars would have gone. But *someone* had to fight the enemy and protect the nation while he slept…and You Miao couldn't keep being the same child who went obediently to sleep anymore.

Without realizing it, his mind drifted back to Li Zhifeng and his home in Jiangnan.

Perhaps what "*In my dreams, the horns blow in unison*"[57] described was his present mindset. He dreamt of Li Zhifeng commanding an army and fighting on the battlefield. Nothing but the cries of killing filled his ears; the air was choked with the devastating screams of soldiers as they fell to their deaths.

You Miao did eventually fall to a hazy slumber until a huge sound jolted him awake. A hand grabbed him by the collar and dragged him out of bed.

"*Run*!" a man's voice roared anxiously into You Miao's ears. "Lord You! The Tartars have entered the city! We must leave at once!"

Still half asleep, You Miao reached out and grabbed at random without purpose. He exclaimed, "What's going on? Where's Zhao Chao?!"

A few soldiers pulled him onto a horse, ignoring his protests, and wrapped him in a robe.

"Watch out!" shouted another man.

"*Aaahhh*—!" cried a soldier, his heart pierced by a flying arrow.

The fire blazing in the city reflected a field of red upon the sky. You Miao couldn't open his eyes with all the suffocating black smoke, and behind him were more angry shouts as the warhorse dashed out of the back alley of the prince's residence, running wildly without direction. All along the way were citizens trying to flee as Tartars emerged from streets large and small and started shooting indiscriminately. You Miao dodged the arrows, and a few Tartars pursued him. He spurred the horse on faster and, upon finding the direction to Zhuque Gate, dashed toward the palace.

The blazing flames raged, burning from the inner city outward and torching a good half of the capital. The Tianqi soldiers were engaged in

combat with the Tartars, and as You Miao charged on his horse, he yelled his question.

"Where's Zhao Chao?!"

But no one had the time to answer him. Under the assault of the Tartar iron cavalry, bodies piled and blood splashed all over You Miao. In that moment, You Miao was finally awake, realizing that the city had fallen.

"Zhao Chao!"

You Miao barged into the palace, where the ground was strewn with bodies. He spurred the horse toward Yangxin Hall. the Imperial Garden had already transformed into a sea of flames.

Ping Xi was leading a small troop of guards, fighting as he ran. When he saw You Miao, he roared, "*Run*!"

You Miao was shaken by the sight and stopped, rooted to the spot—but more and more Tartars were gathering.

Ping Xi continued to yell at him, "Don't just stay there! Escape through the back door!"

The capital had fallen, and everyone was running for their lives. You Miao furiously spurred the horse on, charging through Xuanwu Gate. He nocked his arrow on his bow and shot at any pursuers without question, and lying low on the back of the horse, he dashed out to the outer city. Black smoke rolled; the firelight stretched for hundreds of miles as endless numbers of Tartars charged into the city.

In the first year of Nanzhao, on the twenty-sixth of the twelfth month, the capital fell to enemy occupation.

You Miao had no clue what had happened while he was asleep; he only drove the horse on with abandon, his mind blank. Feather-sized flakes of snow began to fall heavily on the world. After You Miao had reached Jiangjun Ridge north of the capital, he came upon a squadron of soldiers fighting the Tartars. He quickly stopped and let loose his arrows.

"*Run*—!" yelled the commander of the Tianqi army.

The band of soldiers were completely slaughtered by the Tartars, and more pursuers were charging his way, so Yu Miao had to change the horse's direction and run westward like his life depended on it. More and more pursuers were showing up, and slowly, they spread into a fan-shaped formation over the snowy field, outflanking him. You Miao drove the horse into the woods, crunching through the snow as flakes flew in his wake.

Then, someone lunged out from the side and seized You Miao, knocking him to the ground. He hit his head upon impact and his sight went black, losing consciousness of all that went on.

A very long time passed, and it was another bout of angry shouts that jolted him awake. You Miao was still half-conscious when he heard a voice call him.

"Ziqian, wake up!"

You Miao opened his eyes, his body convulsing from the cold. The pale rays of the sun were so blinding, he couldn't stop tearing up. Soon after, a wooden rod was thrust in his direction, jabbing him right in the belly. The blow was so hard he nearly vomited out his insides.

"Augh—!"

You Miao caught the rod with his hands, his eyes bloodshot, but was then smacked by it on the nose. Blood instantly flowed from his nostrils, and he fell to the ground.

"That's enough!" Zhao Chao roared.

At the sound of that voice, You Miao quieted down significantly, and he looked out while covering his bleeding nose. He found that he was inside a cage, and all around him were men and women who were equally trapped.

The Tartar soldiers all burst out in wanton laughter, their figures blocking the sunlight. Several large, burly Tartars unfastened their pants and started to piss into the cage. A child shrieked, and You Miao immediately reached out to hug the boy beside him to protect him. His back faced the outside, and was consequently splashed with urine.

The wooden rod was stuck into the cage again, and it gave You Miao a solid round of beating. You Miao had never been beaten so severely in his life, and he saw stars in an instant. He heaved nonstop, though he never let go of the boy in his arms.

Completely stunned, the boy cried out, "Help! Help—!"

"Don't talk…" You Miao gritted out with difficulty.

"Tartar dog! Come over here!" With hands gripping the bars, Zhao Chao yelled furiously as he slammed his body against the cage. "You hear me?!"

Just as the Tartar soldiers moved to discipline Zhao Chao, however, the sharp sound of a whistle came from the distance and the cages began to move. Without any more time to humiliate the prisoners of war further, the

Tartar soldiers hopped onto their horses and continued on their way, escorting the cages.

At last, You Miao breathed a sigh of relief and fell back onto the cage's floor. The boy crawled over, wanting to check on You Miao's condition, but at the same time, was afraid of getting dirty.

"What…what's your name?" the boy asked with a quivering voice.

You Miao threw a feeble glance at him and gave him a reassuring nod.

The boy added, "I, I, I…I'm the son of Minister Ji of the Ministry of Public Works. My name is Ji…Ji Guang…"

You Miao patted his back, comforting him, and Ji Guang continued, "I'll tell my dad…"

"I didn't save you because you're a young master…" You Miao curled up inside the cage and mumbled, "I'm a young master, too…"

Wailing winds blew, bringing the cries of the wintry world. The convoy comprised of nothing but cages filled with captured Hans set off. You Miao didn't know where they were going; ever since he had woken, the fleet had been constantly on the move. Nonetheless, he at least knew one thing: the capital had fallen.

Perhaps this band of Tartars were planning to bring them to the far north, beyond the Wall, to keep them as slaves or hostages and force the Hans to pay ransom. Their only hope was that Zhao Zhuo was still alive, and had escaped the capital. This also implied that the capital would relocate to Jiangnan, after which he might think of a way to ransom them back.

For as far as the eye could see, there was snow and nothing but snow, and they had traveled in it for an entire day without a bite to eat. The urine on You Miao had frozen to ice, and it was so cold that he was violently shivering, his eyelids drooping heavily.

"Don't fall asleep…"

You Miao jerked up at the voice. His sight was blurry, but he noticed that it was Zhao Chao.

"If you fall asleep, you die…" Zhao Chao said in a suppressed whisper, "Hang in there…"

You Miao nodded. At noon, his eyes were stinging and continuously tearing up under the sun. The convoy stopped and several Tartars shouted,

making them descend the carriages to kneel in the snow. With whips in their hands, they began to lash at each of the prisoners, laughing as they did so.

The lashings felt as sharp as knives. During this torture, You Miao noticed someone else he recognized among the prisoners—Zhang Wenhan. Zhang Wenhan was the most severely whipped, and his face bled profusely. After the Tartars found entertainment with them, they were then bound together before being given some doughy bread. Holding it in hand with difficulty, You Miao swallowed the bites mixed with snow. The break didn't last for two hours before they were forced to stand in a line and trudge painfully in the snow, following the rope that bound them.

"Wenhan…" Staggering, You Miao whispered to the person lined in front of him, "Wenhan!"

Zhang Wenhan was in a daze from the whipping, his head heavy. Leaning against You Miao, his complexion was pale and sunken from the agony.

"Shaoye," he said.

"Wenhan! Why were you also captured? Didn't I tell you to go home?" You Miao questioned.

Zhang Wenhan appeared to have gained some clarity, and replied, "Shaoye, we ran into the Barbarians in Hanyin County and strayed from the convoy, so we had no choice but to return to the capital with His Majesty's escort. The professors of the National University had us pack all the books onto carriages to bring back to Jiangnan, but we didn't expect to run into the Tartars halfway. They killed the professors, and the fifty cars of books were burnt, too… Shaoye, why are you here as well?"

You Miao was speechless.

"Fifty cars of books…" someone said in a quivering voice laced with tears. "Were they all the National University's prized tomes?"

"All the teachers are dead," Zhang Wenhan said numbly, "Professor Jiang was cut down in the carriage by a mess of blades…"

"Oh heavens—!"

Another person burst into tears.

"Don't cry!" Zhao Chao hissed from behind. "Shut up, all of you! Don't alert the Tartars!"

You Miao felt his nose prickle, but his tears were forced back by fear. He looked up and scanned around. When he saw the Tartars who were

escorting the prisoners of war looking back, he quickly signaled everyone around to remain quiet. There would probably be trouble if they noticed them talking.

"Ziqian," Zhao Chao called quietly. "Can you hear me?"

You Miao whispered back, "I hear you."

The twenty-some prisoners were split into two groups, wobbling as they marched in the snow. Zhao Chao tugged on the rope and called out quietly, "Those in the front, walk slower!"

The speed of their group slowed and You Miao fell unnoticeably behind, coming closer to Zhao Chao until they could hear each other clearly.

"Don't look back. Just answer my questions," Zhao Chao said.

"Was it you who sent people to get me out of the capital?" You Miao asked.

"Yes," Zhao Chao replied. "I told you to escape southward; why did you run to Jiangjun Ridge?"

"Zhuque Gate was completely sealed off by the enemy; I couldn't escape from there!" You Miao replied.

"Did you see the Imperial Army on your way?" Zhao Chao questioned.

"No… Wait! Yes! I did see them! They were just south of Jiangjun Ridge!"

You Miao immediately recalled the squadron he had seen beyond the valley when he tried to escape from the north gate. They seemed to have been the Imperial Army.

Zhao Chao drew in a sharp breath. With a trembling voice, he asked, "Oh no. Did that group manage to escape?"

"I didn't see clearly," You Miao said. "They might have all been killed."

Zhao Chao staggered and fell to the ground, rousing a disturbance around. The leading Tartar soldier immediately noticed the commotion and came over with his whip, lashing out at all of them without questions. However, this group of youths were either commanding officers or scholars; their backbones were as hard as could be, and no one uttered a sound.

Zhao Chao didn't speak again. The Tartars were taking them farther and farther north of Yellow River, and You Miao knew this most likely

meant they were taking them beyond the northern border. Only after they reached the roads would they be able to find a way to escape.

Night fell, and the vast, empty wilderness was packed with people with suppressed sounds of weeping. Exhausted, You Miao sat down next to his fellow captives. The Tartar troop was taking a temporary break, so the prisoners sat huddled together to block out the freezing winds.

"Zhao Chao… Zhao Chao!" You Miao called out with a frown.

Zhao Chao was sitting far away from You Miao, his expression numb. You Miao's call had him glance up, however, and he whispered something to the person next to him, gesturing them to pass the message to You Miao.

Another commotion was roused among the scholars, and You Miao quickly looked up.

Someone next to him said, "His Highness's original message: 'My brother and my father might have died.'"

You Miao's mind went blank. Now he finally understood why Zhao Chao had that reaction—the squadron he'd seen back at Jiangjun Ridge might have very well been the Crown Prince and the Emperor's guards… No, to be correct, it would've been the Emperor and the *Grand* Emperor's escort. But even if that were the case, they might not have died. Contrarily, they might have been captured instead.

You Miao was still thinking when another message was passed to him.

"Li Yan committed treason."

Four simple words, but they exploded in You Miao's ears like thunder. Sorrow colored the faces of the scholars, but You Miao rebutted the idea.

"Don't say that! That might not be the case!"

A Tartar soldier came over and lashed the man who was on the furthest edge of the line of captives, and tossed him a flatbread before he left again.

You Miao recognized the unfortunate prisoner, and called out quietly, "Shaonan!"

The man was indeed one of You Miao's good friends from back in the day—the son of the Vice Minister of Rites, Qin Shaonan. His head streamed with blood from the lashing, but he waved dismissively, his breaths coming short and quick. After the Tartar had left, Qin Shaonan took a bite out of the flatbread, looking battered and sorry. He then passed the flatbread on to Zhao Chao, who was next to him. Zhao Chao also took a bite and passed it on to the next person on his left.

“I don’t eat handouts!” the man gritted out in anger. “Eat if all of you must.”

“Take a bite!” Zhao Chao commanded. “You have to live. Live so you can take revenge!”

The young civil official sighed, then took a bite out of the flatbread.

“If he didn’t commit treason, then why didn’t he return?” someone questioned.

The group huddled in front of the campfire, joined to one another by the rope that bound their hands. The northerly winds began to blow, and almost all the Tartars had entered their tents, leaving only two out to patrol the grounds. The group were situated downwind, so while it was awfully cold and they were shivering terribly, they could finally talk.

You Miao answered the question, “If he had wanted to run, he would’ve been long gone. He didn’t need to turn traitor for personal gain.”

Zha Chao gave a “mn,” his eyes fixed on the fire.

You Miao proceeded to elaborate for the group. “There is already no one above the Li father and son save for the Emperor, so even if they sought refuge with the Tartars, there are no higher positions for them to take. Unless he was given, given…”

You Miao trailed off, silencing himself. After all, Zhao Chao was still here, so he couldn’t utter such treasonous words.

Besides, You Miao felt that although Li Yan thought and acted differently than they did, someone who possessed the courage to leave the city alone to enter the enemy camp for negotiation talks was not one who would submit to intimidation.

If he should already be dead,

Who would know the hypocrisy of his life?[58]

[END VOLUME 2]

GLOSSARY

Name Guide

When addressing another person in Chinese, it is the polite convention to refer to them by their title or position rather than their name, especially if the person is in a station above you. Likewise, to convey humility, one would refer to oneself as one's position or a vague, lower-status entity. The direct addresses of "you," "I," or "me" are considered to be vulgar, or imply a more familiar relationship.

Diminutives, Nicknames, Nametags

General

- **Da-:** "Big." Always a prefix.
- **-Er:** "Son" or "Child." Always a suffix. An affectionate address from an elder, or used as a familiar diminutive for those of lower status.
- **Lao-:** "Old." Always a prefix. Used for familiar elders, family, or close friends.
- **Xiao-:** "Little." Always a prefix.
- **-Zi:** Same as -Er.

Family

- **Shu(shu):** Younger paternal uncle. Can be used to address familiar elders.
- **Da-ge:** Oldest brother, or a casual familiar address for an older male friend.
- **Di(di):** Familiar address for younger brother or a younger male friend.
- **Ge(ge):** Familiar address for older brother or an older male friend.
- **Jie(jie):** Familiar address for an older sister or an older female friend.
- **Jiu(jiu):** Maternal uncle.
- **Jiuma:** Maternal uncle's wife.

- **Sao(zi):** Sister-in-law, the wife of your older brother or familiar older male friend of the same generation.
- **Xiandi:** "Wise/worthy younger brother." Formal term of respect for a younger brother or a younger male friend.
- **Xiao-di:** Casual familiar address for a younger brother or a younger male friend. Can also mean "lackey" depending on context.
- **Xiao-jiu:** "Little (maternal) uncle." Affectionate.
- **Xiong:** Elder brother, or a familiar address for a male friend.
- **Xiongdi:** Generic word for "Brother." Can refer to both family or friends.
- **Yudi**: "Foolish little brother." Formal self-diminutive for a younger brother or a younger male friend addressing the older.
- **Yuxiong:** "Foolish older brother." Formal self-diminutive for an older brother or an older male friend addressing the younger.

When there is more than one family member in the same generation, they are assigned a number according to their birth, and addressed as such rather than by direct names. The eldest is given "Da," then "-Er" for second-oldest, and so on.

Example: Ping Xi is the second son in his family, so he is nicknamed Ping-Er. Qiao Jue calls Qiao Ke-er "san-jie" or "third sis" because she is the third child.

1: Da
2: Er
3: San
4: Si
5: Wu

Titles

- **Gongzi:** Young Master or Gentleman. A broad term of respect for the son of a noble or affluent birth.
- **Laoye:** Master or Lord; the master of a house or a lord official/officer.
- **Shaoye:** Young Master or Young Lord. A term of respect used by those in service of the house.
- **Grand General Wude**: A prestigious military title. Wude means "Military Virtue."

Barbarians: Ethnic groups outside the border of China, and specifically in this text, the nomadic tribes north of the Great Wall of China. The ones that encroach on the northern Chinese border vary by period.

Beyond the Border/Wall: Refers to the land beyond the Great Wall of China. The Great Wall is a massive, extensive bulwark that stretches across northern China and southern Mongolia. Traditionally built for defense against the peoples north of the Chinese border, the wall consists of multiple "passes" that are major strongholds in strategic points of the wall for both defense and international trade.

Capital Army: The army stationed outside the capital city that defends it and its surrounding areas.

Central Plains: Also known as the "Middle Kingdom" or "Midland," it is the part of the North China Plain that surrounds the lower and middle reaches of the Yellow River. It is where the Han ethnicity was conceived and believed to be the center of the world. It is the political, economic, and cultural center of Chinese civilization for a large part of Chinese history.

Due Diligence Army: When the monarch is in trouble, the Order of Due Diligence is issued to all the officials within the kingdom and those who have sworn allegiance to the country to rise and protect the throne. Their assembled army is the Due Diligence Army.

Holidays:

- **New Year:** The most important holiday on the calendar, and marks the start of a new year. An important time for family gatherings and wrapping up business from the previous year.
- **Qixi/Crafter's Festival**: July 7th on the Lunar Calendar is Qixi, a festival celebrating romantic love. It is in reference to the legend of the two lovers Zhinu and Niulang, a celestial weaver and a human ox herder who were separated by the Heavenly Emperor and could only meet on this day once a year. It is also known as Crafter's Festival, because the celestial weaver is said to have nimble hands.
- **Shangyuan/Lantern Festival/Yuanxiao:** Shangyuan Festival, also known as Yuanxiao, is the Lantern Festival. It is held on the first full moon of the new year, marking the end of Lunar New Year.

Imperial Army: The army stationed inside the capital city that oversees its security and interior defense.

Imperial State Exam: a civil service examination system for selecting candidates for state bureaucracy. Civil Service and Scholarship are the highest of prestige for a citizen regardless of background.

Memorial to the Throne: a carefully crafted essay presenting an issue to communicate to the emperor. Depending on the circumstances, it is sometimes directed to certain officials also.

Political Advisor: A position established in the Song Dynasty; it started as a role akin to Deputy Chancellor that later evolved to one that is equal to a Chancellor.

Red Pocket/Envelope: A monetary gift. Red is the color for joyous occasions.

Tanghulu: Candied fruit skewers. The fruit is traditionally Chinese hawthorn, but it can feature other fruits, such as strawberries.

Vassal King: The ruler and lord of a territory conferred by the emperor, to whom they owe allegiance. The title given to vassal kings is "Prince." Vassal Kings are often imperial princes who will not succeed the throne and military aristocrats.

Government

Censorate: The independent department that supervises officialdom. It is the second highest office after the Chancellor. The censors report directly to the emperor.

Directorate of Education: The department of education that determined the subjects and standards of studies on a national level, and was the largest library and publisher of various writings. The Imperial College was the school under this agency, though it was only a school for monarchs and the children of high officials, to groom them for court. In certain dynasties, the Directorate of Education and the Imperial College were a single entity.

Hanlin Academy: The institution whose members are the elite literati of the nation. They perform literary and administrative duties for the imperial court, such as drafting initial legislation.

Ministry of Justice: In charge of judicial and penal processes but has no supervisory role over the Censorate or the Supreme Court.

Ministry of Personnel: In charge of appointments, merit ratings, promotions, demotions, and granting of honorific titles.

Ministry of Revenue: In charge of census data, tax collection, state revenues, and currency management.

Ministry of Rites: In charge of state and religious ceremonies, foreign relations, and the imperial state examination.

Ministry of War: In charge of appointments, promotions and demotions of military officers, maintenance of military installations, equipment and weapons, as well as the courier system. In times of war, the Ministry of War also serves as strategists and advisors to the frontline commanders.

Ministry of Works: In charge of government engineering and construction projects, hiring of artisans and laborers for temporary service, manufacturing government equipment, the maintenance of roads and canals, standardization of weights and measures, and the gathering of resources from the territories.

Supreme Court: An agency in charge of reviewing judicial proceedings at all administrative levels, and singling out cases for retrial by court officials or the Emperor himself. Works closely with the Censorate and the Ministry of Justice.

Measurement

This translation uses predominantly the American Imperial System, and at times Metric. The numbers are approximated for ease of reading and are not to be scrutinized.

Currency

The currency used is ingots of gold, silver, and copper coins. They are further weighed to calculate denominations.

1 tael of gold = 30 taels of silver

1 tael of silver = 1000 copper coins

1 mace of silver = 100 copper coins

Broken Silver: Refers to silver pieces that are smaller than one tael and used like loose change, their value dependent on their weight.

One String of Coins: Another way to say 1000 copper coins, as the coins are usually looped onto a string for ease of use.

Time

Shichen: The day is divided into 12 shichen, with roughly 2 hours per shichen.

- Zi [midnight]: 11pm - 1am
- Chou: 1am - 3am
- Yin: 3am - 5am
- Mao [sunrise]: 5am - 7am
- Chen: 7am - 9am
- Si: 9am - 11am
- Wu [noon]: 11am - 1pm
- Wei: 1pm - 3pm
- Shen: 3pm - 5pm
- You [sunset]: 5pm - 7pm
- Xu [dusk]: 7pm - 9pm
- Hai: 9pm - 11pm

Geng: The night after sundown is further divided into five geng, otherwise known as five periods or five watches. At the start of every watch, a Gengfu, or a Night-Watchman, will make a round of the city and strike a wooden plank to signal the time.

- 1 geng: 7pm - 9pm
- 2 geng: 9pm - 11pm
- 3 geng: 11pm - 1am
- 4 geng: 1am - 3am
- 5 geng: 3am - 5am

Incense Time: Incense sticks are made to measure time by a day, an hour, half an hour, and so forth. When referenced in this novel, it means 30 minutes.

Imperial State Exam System

Juvenile Exam: Takes place at the local county/regional level; presided by local officials. Pass this to become a **Xiucai**, akin to a high school graduate.

Prefectural Exam: takes place in the provincial/prefectural capital city; presided by appointed officials of the Imperial Court. Pass this to become a **Juren**, akin to a university graduate. The title for first place is **Jieyuan**.

Metropolitan Exam: takes place in the Capital, presided by appointed officials from the Ministry of Rites. Pass this to become a **Gongshi**. The tile for first place is **Huiyuan**.

Palace Exam: takes place in the Capital, presided by the Minister of Rites and the Emperor. Pass this to become a **Jinshi**. Those who pass will have their names posted on the **Golden Billboard.**

Beginning in the Song Dynasty, those who successfully earned the Jinshi degree were ranked by score in three classes. The first class consisted of the top three scorers. The second and third classes may have as many scorers as the government required.

In the first class, the first place is **Zhuangyuan**, the second place is **Bangyan**, and the third place is **Tanhua**. In the second and third classes, the first place is **Chuanlu**.

- **Xiucai** is a recognized scholar identity, but not yet an official civil servant.
- **Juren** is a prefectural graduate. They have the qualifications to become an official, but may not necessarily succeed. They may to enter civil service through "The Great Selection."
- **Jieyuan** is the principal graduate of the Prefectural Exam.
- **Gongshi** is a scholar who passed the Metropolitan Exam. They are qualified to take the Palace Exams.
- **Jinshi** is a metropolitan graduate. They become civil officials, to be imperially appointed anywhere in the country.

Tutelage of the Examiner: Graduates of prefectural exams will often consider the examiner their teacher to create a master-pupil bond, a relationship that will benefit them beyond scholarship. Likewise, as the examiners are imperially-appointed officials, they are also glad to take up-

and-coming new talents under their wing and later recommend them to posts beneficial to their cause.

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[1] A large, crudely built recruitment center. Not to be confused with workhouses of Industrial England.

[2] Second sister-in-law

[3] Newly-hatched young fish.

[4] From “Mencius: Li Lou, Part One.”

[5] A paraphrased quote from Su Shi, a renowned Song poet.

[6] Ancient Korea.

[7] A decorative lantern with images drawn on it. The lantern revolves with the hot air of the candle, giving the images an animated effect.

[8] “The Green Jade Table: Yuanxiao Night” by Xin Qiji, Southern Song Dynasty.

[9] “The Tinkling of Heavy Rain” by Liu Yong, Song Dynasty.

[10] “A Beautiful Zither” by Li Shangyin, Tang Dynasty.

[11] Proper etiquette dictates that the head of the household or the one with the highest status present must be the first to start the meal, so Qiao Jue and Li Zhifeng couldn’t have started eating until You Miao made this gesture.

[12] The Three Character Classic [三字经] is a 13th century reading primer consisting of Confucian tenets, written in lines of three characters apiece.

[13] “The Way of Ultimate Wisdom” is a chapter in “The Book of Rites” by Confucius. It is one of the Four Books of Confucianism. The Four Books were selected by the Neo-Confucian scholar Zhu Xi during Song Dynasty as the foundational introduction to Confucianism.

[14] Rationalism [理学] is a neo-Confucian school of philosophy that was held in high regard in the Song Dynasty. Neo-Confucianism is founded on the principles of Confucianism, but removes Taoist and Buddhist superstitions and mysticism.

[15] Zhu Xi was the founder of Rationalism and the most influential Neo-Confucian in Ancient China.

[16] It is tradition to reward those who bring good news with a tip. For extra good news, such as passing the exams or a promotion, anyone who comes to congratulate within the first minute can also receive a small reward.

[17] Older generation’s familiar address for the younger; no family ties required.

[18] Local officials are called parent officials because they watch over the local people like a parent would.

[19] From “The Classics of Virtue and Morality” by Laozi.

[20] Both Wenhan [文翰] and Mohuai [墨怀] are scholarly names.

[21] Since Zhang Wenhan gained the Juren title, he is now on equal status with You Hange and can address him as an equal.

[22] One of Lu Yu's many sobriquets.

[23] A shortened version of an excerpt from the chapter "The Way of Ultimate Wisdom," from "The Book of Rites" by Confucius. In summary, those who wish to disseminate great virtue in the world must first properly govern their states, and to succeed in that, one must first properly manage their family, and to succeed in that, one must first cultivate oneself, and so on.

[24] From "The Art of War" by Sun Tzu.

[25] A verse from "Doctrine of the Mean," a chapter from "The Book of Rites." It is attributed to Kong Ji, Confucius's only grandson.

[26] The opening line to the *"Tao Te Ching,"* or *"The Classics of the Way and Virtue"* by Laozi. Laozi is the founder of Taoism, and the *"Tao Te Ching"* is the foundational text of Taoism. "The Path," "The Way," and "The Principle" are all variations of the translation for Tao.

[27] A verse from the "Analects" by Confucius.

[28] *"The Classic of Music"* is a Confucian classic that is now lost. It is thought to have been important in the traditional interpretations of *"The Book of Songs."*

[29] *"Zhuangzi*" is a foundational text of Taoism, right alongside *"The Classics of the Way and the Virtue."* It is full of parables that exemplify the carefree nature of Taoism.

[30] Zhuangzi preached the philosophy of "let nature take its course," and to do nothing that will go against nature; to govern without intervening with nature.

[31] A verse from *"The Book of Rites,"* meaning that we should understand how to conduct ourselves based on our contact with things.

[32] Shuofang is You Hange's courtesy name.

[33] Examinees who passed the Palace Exam would have their names published on the Golden Billboard.

[34] Yue Fei was an eminent general of the Southern Song Dynasty who had fought the Jin army to recover the northern lands for ten years, winning every battle. He was a national hero, a symbol of loyalty and patriotism, and greatly respected by the foreign tribes also. He was also known for his martial arts, calligraphy, and poetry.

[35] The Humiliation of Jingkang refers to the siege of the Northern Song imperial capital in 1127 AD, when the Emperor, the Grand Emperor, and many other members of the imperial family and court officials were captured by the Jurchens.

[36] A form of soccer.

[37] Territorial administration is the regional government entity outside the capital/central government.

[38] July 7th on the Lunar Calendar is Qixi, a festival celebrating romantic love. It is in reference to the legend of the two lovers Zhinu and Niulang, a celestial weaver and a human ox herder, who were separated by the Heavenly Emperor and could only meet on this day once a year. It is also known as Crafter's Festival, because the celestial weaver is said to have nimble hands.

[39] The Crafter's Festival is one of the rare holidays without a curfew, which allows unmarried women to come out of the household and stroll the streets. Thus, it is also considered a romantic holiday, because it is possible to meet one's lover on this day.

[40] Yudi: [愚弟]"Foolish little brother." Formal self-diminutive for a younger brother or a younger male friend addressing the older.

[41] A verse from "Lyrics to the Raw Haws Melody—Lantern Festival Play, Chen Jingsou" by Liu Kezhuang, Song Dynasty.

[42] Verses from "The Tinkling of Heavy Rain" by Liu Yong, Song Dynasty.

[43] Verse from "The Butterfly's Love for the Flower" by Yan Shu, Song Dynasty.

[44] From "The Method of Sima" or "The Marshal's Method," 4th century BC. Likely a compilation of various military treatises during the Warring States period, it is one of the seven military classics of Ancient China. It justifies war as a necessity for peace.

[45] A Tang Dynasty poet.

[46] Third little brother.

[47] Chen Tuan is a Taoist sage, often seen as an immortal. He pioneered the Confucian school of Idealist philosophy in the Song Dynasty.

[48] Taoist magic and superstitious arts.

[49] In Confucian philosophy, "the Heavens, the Earth, the Ruler, the Family, the Teacher," in that order, are the five entities to be worshipped at the altar. Showing reverence for the Heavens and Earth, loyalty to the country, filial piety to one's parents and ancestors, and respect for one's teacher is the basis of ethics and morality in traditional society.

[50] Royal (older) brother.

[51] Fourth younger paternal uncle.

[52] Government salary consisted of both money and grain, usually divided in equal value amounts.

[53] When the monarch is in trouble, the Order of Due Diligence is issued to all the officials and those who have sworn allegiance to the country to rise and protect the throne.

[54] "Inner City" is another name for the palace, as it is a small city of its own sitting in the center of the capital city.

[55] Quoting Mencius.

[56] Jade discs, or "bi," are artifacts used in ceremony. It also served as an important symbol of rank. In the Zhou Dynasty, the defeated forces would hand over their bi disc to the victor as a sign of submission.

[57] A verse from “Crushing the Enemy Formation” by Xin Qiji, Song Dynasty.

[58] “Five Poems of Presumptuous Speech—Third” by Bai Juyi, Tang Dynasty. To briefly summarize this poem: Only time will tell whether someone is genuine or false.